Online Key Opinion Leaders as Popular Propagandists

The Propagation of Cyber Nationalism on the Chinese Internet

Weixiang Wang

Postgraduate Researcher of School of Politics and International Relations,

University of Nottingham

September 2024

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program and ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Abstract

This thesis examines the propagation of nationalism in the cybersphere of the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 2022 and 2023, with a specific focus on nationalistic online key opinion leaders acting in the capacity of "popular propagandists". By examining their communication activities, I address the overarching research question: "How is cyber nationalism propagated in China by popular propagandists?" This is an important research question due to the enduring significance of both propaganda and nationalism in China-related research and the increasing scholarly interest in the Chinese Internet.

I conceptualize cyber nationalism as "online nationalist narratives in relation to China co/reproduced and disseminated by different actors, particular those mediated through the distinctive practices of digital (sub)cultures." In order to answer the research question, I construct my theoretical framework based on the concept of "total propaganda" and treat the communication activities of popular propagandists as a process of the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalist messages involving different communicators.

The empirical study establishes a database of most influential popular propagandists, and a large corpus of online political discussions produced by them based on a seven-month observation of Sina Weibo, the most popular social media platform in China. I use qualitative content analysis to investigate the inter/intra-case and inter/intra-actor variations of propaganda messages of three different political events, which are former US House majority leader Nancy Pelosi's Taiwan visit, China's anti-lockdown protest

against the background of its Covid-19 policy shift and China's surveillance balloon's intruding into the US's airspace.

Acknowledgement

My first and foremost thank goes to my grandfather, who unfortunately passed away during my study in the UK. He was the person who enlightened my interest in politics and taught me the importance of holding a critical view and not taking things for granted. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my two supervisors, Jonathan Sullivan and Gulshan Khan, for their diligent and brilliant guidance not only for my thesis but also for cultivating me as a researcher. I am grateful to my two examiners, Bingchun Meng and Pauline Eadie, who offered me critical and inspiring feedback to improve the project. I would also like to thank my annual reviewer Bettina Renz, who have always been helpful throughout my PRG journey and offered me valuable suggestions. I also wish to thank Oana Burcu and Annemarie Walter, who encouraged me to embark the journey of PhD, something I would never dare to dream of before. My thanks also go to Chun-yi Lee and Hongyi Lai who have offered me opportunities to work on various research projects, which not only horned my research skills but also eased my financial burdens. My special thank goes to my girlfriend Laylaa, without whom I can hardly complete the long and solitude journey. Finally, I truly appreciate the mental and financial support from my parents, for allowing their child to pursue something too idealistic, and to a certain extent, too sensitive in China.

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Chapter One: Introduction

My research interest is grounded in examining the propagation of China's cyber nationalism. I study the role played by "popular propagandists" in the process of dissemination and co/reproduction of nationalist narratives. By popular propagandists, I am referring to nationalistic online key opinion leaders who actively comment on sociopolitical issues. Popular propagandists are self-made media practitioners of grassroots backgrounds, who are not bounded by as strict editorial rules as mainstream news outlets or official propagandists but actively engage with digital (sub)cultures and speak in a down-to-earth tone. Nevertheless, I still treat their communication activities as propaganda based on a critical engagement with Jacques Ellul and Alexander Edelstein's theories. According to their perspective, propaganda is not monopolized by specific actors of certain organizations, nor restricted to formal political texts such as parliament debates or campaign speeches. Employing in-depth content analysis upon the messages produced by popular propagandists, I conceptualize the propaganda activities of non-official actors on the Chinese Internet and reveal the complexities in the dissemination and co/reproduction of nationalist narratives. The overarching research question of this thesis is: How is cyber nationalism propagated in China by nationalistic online key opinion leaders acting in the capacity as "popular propagandists"?

Setting the Scene

"Prosecuting Mo Yan"

- *Prosecuting Mo Yan! Ruling the country by Law! Do not treat Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law as a façade! I have submitted prosecution materials*

detailing Mo Yan's smearing on heroes and martyrs to the court…… I am willing to take the legal consequence and go to jail if my charges against him was unjust. Should he be found guilty, Mo Yan must pay the price and take the punishments!

- *Nowadays, many people express extreme and radical perspectives online, who legitimize themselves in the name of "patriotism" or "positive energy". They pick up quarrels and stir up troubles with various people and issues, harming our society's harmony and diversity. I'm afraid that we must clarify what "positive energy" is and is not. It should include all positive elements that advances socialist market economy and realizes the great rejuvenation of Chinese nation……*

I would like to begin the thesis with a short story about Mo Yan (whose real name is Guan Moye), the only Chinese writer who has ever won the Nobel Literature Award. Mo's work documents the 20th century China, a historical period witnessing tremendous changes taking place in the country. Unlike the dissident Liu Xiaobo, Mo Yan is an officially celebrated Nobel laureate in China. Still, he has received numerous criticisms both from home and abroad for different reasons. Internationally, Mo Yan has been criticized for his status as an establishment figure, or simply not being an outspoken critic of the Chinese Party-state. Domestically, however, Mo has been subject to the attacks particularly from China's "left", the ideological label in China generally referring to those opposing liberalism, pluralism, capitalism while assuming a more collective, egalitarian and nationalistic view. His discussions of sensitive historical events such as the Sino-Japan War (1937-1945), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and birth control (post-1965) often contain details going against the

prescribed official line (such as Japanese soldiers helping Chinese people). The Internet provides the venue for amplifying such voices, such as the online forum Utopia (*wuyou zhixiang*, 乌有之乡). Notwithstanding these criticisms, Mo Yan remains a publicly respectable and officially endorsed figure as the vice chairman of Chinese Writer Association.

The protagonist of my story, however, is not the talented yet controversial storyteller Mo Yan, but a "nobody" without the prolificity, wisdom and civility of the Nobel laureate. He did, however, generate sensations arguably no less than the news of "Mo Yan winning Nobel Prize" on the Chinese Internet. On 27 February 2024, Weibo user "Mao Xinghuo who speaks the truth" posted the first post as quoted above on his account. Mao, an individual citizen whose real name is Wu Wanzheng, listed ten pieces of evidence based on quotations from Mo's literary works and speeches which constituted "insults and smears" against "martyrs, soldiers, great leader Mao Zedong, Chinese people and China". He demanded Mo Yan's public apology and a redemption of "1 rmb yuan to each Chinese citizen", totalling over 1.5 billion rmb yuan (over 160 million GBP). One month later, he announced that, regretfully, his legal actions were aborted because no court was willing to accept his case. He vowed to fight on and threatened to prosecute the publishers of Mo's works.

Despite its sensational effects, Mao Xinghuo's accusations against Mo Yan hardly contain anything novel. All the "evidence" he presented are words taken out of context, behind which is the less-than-impressive reproduction of the leftists' old criticisms against Mo. What is more intriguing is the domino effects caused by Mao Xinghuo's sensational act. Without signs of heavy censorship, "Big Vs", who are individual online key opinion leaders boasting thousands or even millions of

followers, weighed in and drove the discussion agenda. Mao Xinghuo's act has since drew mixed reactions, with some lending their support and applauding for his courage while others dismissing his actions as "hyping up" (*chaozuo*, 炒作) and witch-hunt.

The second quoted post was among the most sophisticated criticisms. In contrast to Mao's agitational and blunt language, the post reads cool-headed and even contains reflexive notes towards the vulgar expressions of cyber nationalism. The post was from Hu Xijin, the former chief editor of China's arguably most nationalistic news outlet *Global Times*. Having an active social media presence on X, which is officially banned in China, Hu is anything but a liberal-minded person. Back in August 2022, he called for "shooting down" former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's plane to prevent her from landing in Taiwan. In fact, regardless of their different opinions on this very issue, a close examination of the "Big Vs" who were involved in the Mo Yan controversy reveals one thing in common: Most of them speak in a nationalistic tone and devote consistent attention to sociopolitical issues happening in both China and abroad. It is this group of actors' communication activities that triggered my research interest and prompted me to write this thesis. Before introducing my research question, I shall lay down the background knowledge about this research.

China Matters

Historic Background

The nation-building process of People's Republic of China (PRC) is full of hardships. The Communist Party of China (CPC) fought bitter wars with the invading Imperial Japanese armies and subsequently their domestic rival Nationalist Party (KMT) for more than two decades and emerged as the ultimate winner in 1949. Politically, the

CPC followed the Soviet Union's one-party dictatorship, essentially turning China into a Party-state where the party organizations lead the government. Mao Zedong, the first supreme leader of the PRC, also built the personality cult mirroring his Soviet counterpart Joseph Stalin, which wreaked severe havoc to the country's economy, bureaucracy and civil society. Starting from late 1950s, the Party became increasingly intolerant of domestic criticisms and promoted "class struggle" to root out "rightists", an ideological label given to capitalists and intellectuals whom the Party had previously worked with. Mao's serious policy mistakes of the "Great Leap Forward" driven by utopian visions led to the economic demise and great famines in the early 1960s, which the Party blamed on extreme climates. The increasing criticisms against Mao within the Party prompted the Chairman to launch Cultural Revolution, appealing to the grassroots to eradicate his political rivals. Starting from 1966, China experienced three-years' quasi-anarchic period, when frenzy Maoists, known as the Red Guards, interrogated and tortured both individual citizens and Marshalls for their alleged reactionary stance. Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent purge of the Party's ultra-left ideologues from the leadership set the country on the new path of "Reform and opening up" under the fresh leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who prioritized economic development over ideological orthodoxy. The honeymoon with the West, the limited political reform and social freedom ground to a halt in 1989, when large-scaled protests spearheaded by university students broke out. This event, which was ultimately met with the regime's forceful crackdown, became the swan song of the PRC civil society's pro-democracy movements, and reinforced the CPC's insecurity and paranoia towards foreign subversion and bottom-up social movements (for example, the record of official documents revealed in Liang et al., (2001) and Zhao (2012)).

The first decade of the 21st century saw China's economic take-off and rapid globalization. The temporary backtracks of economic liberalization after 1989 was called off by Deng in 1997, who reemphasized the need of economic reform. The connectedness of Chinese economy with the world's reached an unprecedented level in 2001, when China finally managed to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Domestically, the Party made the groundbreaking decision to open its membership to private entrepreneurs in the 16th National Party Congress (NPC) and gave private sectors a greater role in its socialist market economy. With this decision, the Party formally freed itself from the ideological tutelage of Communism and the class label of "proletarian party" and broadened its membership base. These developments contributed to China's double-digit economic growth during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Politically, China solved leadership succession problem that had led to severe power struggles between elites in many authoritarian regimes (Herz 1952; Lai 2016: 209-229). Reflecting on the chaos of Mao's late years and the 1989 pro-democracy movement, Deng Xiaoping urged the Party to establish "collective leadership" around a "leadership core", a phrase further developed by Jiang Zemin to consolidate his power (Li 2012). Starting from Jiang's tenure, China has seen smooth power transitions, largely free from large-scaled purges or military coup-d'etat. It has also gone against modernization theory's predication that economically developed authoritarian regimes are most likely to undergo democratic transition (Pei 2006; Chang 2010), with high public support towards the CPC (Saich 2016; Cunningham et al., 2020;). Pro-democracy movements waned after 1989 (Lai 2010). Students, who once spearheaded in anti-government protests during the 1980s and 1990s, are

becoming tamed and politically apathetic (Li 2015). The longevity of the Chinese Party-state under the CPC's dictatorship is characterized as "authoritarian resilience" (Nathan 2003) and "pragmatic authoritarianism" (Lai 2016).

However, significant challenges remain for the Party. Many scholars have pointed out the importance of maintaining legitimacy to the CPC (Edney 2015; Zeng 2016), because unlike democracies, the country lacks meaningful elections as a key mechanism to grant the Party legitimacy. Despite China's success as one of the most stable authoritarian regimes in the world, significant challenges remain in various sectors, from the top echelon of the Party to the grassroots of society. Corruption happens at all levels of the Party, which has seriously eroded public trust towards the government (Zhong 1996). Jiang Zemin's decision to welcome entrepreneurs into the Party has driven corruption to an unprecedented level as the collusions between the private sectors and the government increased substantially. Jiang's successors, Hu Jintao and current President Xi Jinping, have treated anti-corruption as one of the most important matters that concerns the lifeline of the CPC (Keliher & Wu 2014). Lacking independent supervision power, however, the Party could only rely on disciplines, ideological education and periodic campaign to fight corruption, which can hardly address its fundamental cause (Guo 2014). On top of corruption, Xi Jinping's controversial constitutional revision in 2018 that abolished the term limits and practically allowed himself to be "President for life" further adds to the unpredictability as the leadership succession problem looms. Though there is little sign suggesting that Xi is revamping the Maoist personality cult (Mulvard 2019: 468), his over-concentration of power, restless purge of rivals and breaking the "division of

labour" between the Party and the government, plant the seeds of potential disturbance for the country (Shirk 2023: 178-206).

On top of Party affairs, the stagnating economy poses a serious problem to the CPC. Without meaningful elections, the Party relies on performance-based legitimacy, a quasi-social contract under which the public accepts the one-party rule as long as it is able to deliver material benefits (Yang & Zhao 2015). Though Chinese people have become far better-off materially and unlikely to suffer a detrimental blow from the current economic turbulence, the rising youth unemployment and aging populations, plus the alarmingly huge inequality between urban and rural areas as well as different localities all pose significant challenges to the Party's governance (Li et al., 2013; Tong & Lei 2013). Though pro-democracy moments are thin on the ground, the government still spends a lion's share on "stability maintenance", which is the surveillance, prevention and suppression of protests and social unrests (Yang 2017). Meanwhile, external challenges have also driven the increase in China's defence spending, as its growing assertiveness leads to more confrontations with its neighbouring countries and the West. In particular, its rivalry with the US is growing increasingly bitter and brings substantial costs to both countries, including the mounting tensions in Asia-Pacific regions, the increase in trade disputes and tariffs, and the slump in cultural and people-to-people communications (Shirk 2023: 270).

Propaganda, Nationalism and the Chinese Internet

The enduring one-Party rule of the CPC and the mounting challenges it has been facing constitutes the macro-background of this thesis. Joining the literature on China's authoritarian resilience (Nathan 2003; Fewsmith & Nathan 2019), I argue that apart

from institutionalization (Zheng et al., 2014), economic and fiscal policies (Zhang 2017) and coercive capacity (Scoggins 2021), propaganda and the propagation of nationalism is key to sustaining the rule of the CPC. Apart from delivering tangible policy results, modern governments need propaganda to persuade the public of the effectiveness of its governance in order to establish and maintain its legitimacy (Schaar 1981). The 1989 pro-democracy movement, one of the most severe challenges to the Party's legitimacy in post-Mao era, alerted it to the significance of "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo*, 思想工作) and the urgent need to replace Communism ideology that had grown increasingly detached from China's reality (Pei 2002; McGregor 2010). Instructed by Deng Xiaoping, "patriotism" (*aiguo zhuyi*, 爱国主义)[1] became the new pillar of China's propaganda and thought work. His hand-picked successor Jiang Zeming further promoted the ideology in society via "patriotic education", aiming at the younger generations (Wang 2008). In reality, these campaigns carry strong nationalistic colours, foregrounds pre-PRC's "humiliated history", promotes hostility towards the West and loyalty towards the CPC as the guardian of the Chinese nation and Chinese people. The CPC has put in place an overarching "propaganda and ideology *xitong* (system) that covers both traditional and new media" (Brady 2017: 165). By virtue of its overarching propaganda system, nationalism is promulgated in various sectors including advertising, art, culture, education, health, sports, and increasingly, in the digital space (Brady 2017; Schinder 2018, 2023).

[1] This reference to "patriotism" is a literal translation from official terminology and is to be differentiated from "patriotism" as an ideology.

Propaganda has generated a vast corpus of literatures with various focuses including China's domestic governance, political history, foreign policies and its media industry (Edney 2012; Perry 2017; Cai 2019; Landsberger 2020). A product of Chinese modernity and a tool for its social governance (Liu 2019), Chinese propaganda has grown increasingly market-friendly and technology-savvy by tactfully combining the toolkits of Western-developed political communications and public relations with China's revolutionary history (Brady 2009). The use of symbolic resources and soft power to infuse pre-revolution traditional China with the socialist modern China (Perry 2017) have been widely adopted in both its domestic and foreign publicity (*waixuan*, 外宣) (Rawnsley 2008; Edney 2014). However, most propaganda studies on China are preoccupied with the propaganda system and therefore predominantly focus on the official and state level, such as the institutional arrangements and working processes of Central Propaganda Department (CPD) (Shambaugh 2007) or the government's appropriation of mass media industry for propaganda purposes (Zhang 2011). What happens at the local and grassroots level receives insufficient attention, and the public's role is largely reduced to passive receivers of propaganda (Huang 2015; Zou 2019).

Nationalism is a key component of China's propaganda work. Following Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Community* (Anderson 2006), most studies of Chinese nationalism have reckoned the existence of a top-down official nationalism and a bottom-up popular nationalism (Gries 2004; Deans; Ma 2015, 2018). Top-down nationalism broadly refers to state-driven nationalist projects and campaigns, such as the "patriotic education" and the promotion of "China Dream". Bottom-up nationalism normally refers to the public's outburst of nationalistic sentiments. Examples include

the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and 2012, or the more recent online "crusading" against individuals and entities whose acts were deemed as "insulting" China (Yang 2018: 9). The tensions between official and popular nationalism has attracted heated debates. Consensus is yet to reach on whether the state is able to tame and co-opt the outburst of the public's nationalistic sentiments (Shirk 2007: 85; Weiss 2014; Stockmann 2010). The digital information environment provides fresh opportunities to examine the interactions between different nationalist narratives. However, most studies are preoccupied with the confrontation between the official and popular nationalism, highlighting their differences but overlooking their inter-relatedness. The interactions between official and popular nationalism are far more complicated than a zero-sum game. The "official vs. popular" paradigm highlights the distinctions and contentions between different nationalist narratives at the cost of downplaying the internal composition, especially when it comes to popular nationalism whose production and dissemination involves a variety of actors.

The Internet is an ideal site for researching the intersection between propaganda and nationalism. The country's large digital population, the high Internet coverage rate and enormous social media users (CNNIC 2024: 1) make the relevant findings valuable. The state has upgraded its cyber governance and quickly adapted to the new information environment (Creemers 2017). Combining both "controlling" and "harnessing" mechanisms, the Chinese government has largely been successful both in governing the Internet and utilizing it as a tool for governance (Sullivan et al., 2024). On top of sophisticated and prevailing online censorship (Roberts 2018), the state has taken proactive measures to shape online narratives such as increasing government agencies' online presence, experimenting with novel political communication

methods (Creemers 2017; Repnikova & Fang 2019), and encouraging supervised online political participation (Repnikova & Fang 2018). It has also cultivated one of the most vibrant digital economies in the world, driven both by domestic tech giants such as Alibaba and Tencent, and increasingly by the grassroots "wanghong economy" (*wanghong jingji*, 网红经济), where entrepreneurial online influencers engage with E-commerce practices. Though ordinary citizens find the Internet an effective channel to expose scandals and express their discontents, such as corruption and pollution (Auer & Fu 2015), the state has carefully contained such digital activism within limited scales and resolutely cracked down mobilization appeals and challenges to the regime (Sullivan 2014).

This thesis's interest in the communication activities of popular propagandists is situated in these research backgrounds. What I aim to establish through this research is, to begin with, a new perspective of Chinese propaganda highlighting the role played by non-state actors. Without denying the significance of propaganda system, I argue that it is necessary to go beyond CPD and mainstream media, which has already received substantial discussions. The shift to propaganda 3.0 (Liu 2019: 295) suggests more active participation from non-state actors in digital propaganda. Moreover, the case of popular propagandists provides us with a great opportunity to think outside the box of "official vs. popular nationalism" paradigm and reveal the more complex and dynamic interactions between different forces in China. The research design is also a rare attempt to apply the theoretical lens of propaganda to the dissemination of nationalism by non-official actors and offers valuable empirical evidence to the co/re-production and dissemination of China's cyber nationalism. Last but not least, the significance of my inquiry goes beyond the propaganda and nationalism and speaks to

the broader issues including China's cyber governance, online public sphere and digital political culture.

Establishing the Research Question

This thesis examines the role played by popular propagandists, who are nationalistic online opinion leaders, in the propagation of China's cyber nationalism. Propaganda and nationalism are the two concepts guiding the inquiry. There is no hierarchy between the two concepts in this thesis, but rather they address different aspects of the inquiry. Propaganda influences how nationalism is expressed. It is examined as different types of political communications, whose nature is influenced by the rhetoric and tactics in use. Nationalism captures the nationalist expressions embedded in propaganda messages. It is examined as the narratives reflecting distinctive nationalism themes, such as "national pride" and "anti-foreign sentiments". Therefore, the overarching research question this thesis investigates is:

How is cyber nationalism propagated in China by nationalistic online key opinion leaders acting in the capacity of "popular propagandists"?

Popular propagandist is a main concept I will be developing and examining in this thesis. I consider online key opinion leaders who follow an ostensibly "political" agenda (i.e., focusing on commenting on political, social and military affairs) as propagandists. They are, however, "popular" owing to their grassroots background, since they are not government actors. Highlighting the role of popular propagandists, the research question incorporates the arguments and concerns I raised earlier. I aim to reveal how non-state actors operate in China's propaganda system and the complexity within nationalist narratives' production and dissemination by

conceptualizing the role played by popular propagandists as the intermediary level between the official and the grassroots.

I break the overarching research question into several sub-research questions with a multi-step analytical strategy. The first step is to establish a list of active popular propagandists on the Chinese Internet. I choose Sina Weibo, the Chinese counterpart for X and the country's most popular social media platform as the research site and observe it for a period of seven month from August 2022 to February 2023. This step aims to address the first sub-question:

Who are the most influential popular propagandists on the Chinese Internet?

The second step is to provide an overview on popular propagandists' communication activities. An original database containing tens of thousands of posts from the ten most communicators, who are selected for their influence and representativeness, are collected real-time on three separate occasions, August 2022, November 2022, and February 2023. The decision takes both timeliness and the importance of the cases into consideration. A randomly generated samples of 2792 posts are subject to rigorous coding and qualitative content analysis to address the second sub-question:

What are the communication habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles of popular propagandists?

The third step is to conduct in-depth case studies, focusing on popular propagandists' messages on three important political events: former US House majority leader Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan (August 2022), China's anti-lockdown protest and the turn in its pandemic control policy (November 2022) and China's surveillance balloon's

controversial intruding into the US's airspace (February 2023). The three cases are selected for the value in their timeliness and their implications towards different aspects of China's domestic and foreign policies. I shall illustrate what each event's prominent nationalism messages are, how they are expressed and what types of propaganda are reflected from each case. By doing so, I aim to answer the third sub-question:

How do popular propagandists communicate political events of different natures to the public?

By treating online key opinion leaders as "propagandists" and the messages as "propaganda", I am not suggesting that they are necessarily the puppet of the state, or their messages are noting but distortions, lies and deceptions. Critically engaging with propaganda literatures, in particular those of Jacques Ellul (1965) and Alexander Edelstein (1997), I take a "neutral" and sociological view on propaganda. By neutral, I do not commit to a normative agenda by distinguishing between truth and lie as propaganda message contains both facts and falsehood. What matters is what is conveyed and how it is presented by communicators in front of the audience. By sociological, I mean that propaganda is not limited to the activities of "professional" propagandists or mainstream media, nor is it restricted to parliament debates or campaign speeches. Moreover, I do not restrict my focus on the three political events alone but take everyday communications of popular propagandists seriously. This is in line with the sociological view on propaganda's ubiquity and subtleness, and the research design also allows me to compare the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of popular propagandists' communications. Consulting relevant literature on propaganda and nationalism, I design a distinctive coding scheme in order to capture popular

propagandists' communication activities on both contextual and textual levels, such as their posting frequency and the nationalistic themes embedded. In-depth qualitative content analysis will address the "what" and "how" questions.

To sum up, the research design addresses different aspects of the overarching research question, by revealing who the most influential and representative communicators are, illustrating both the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of their propaganda activities, and illuminating what and how popular propagandists communicate to their audience, with particular emphasis to the "nationalistic core" of their messages.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter Two reviews literature of Chinese nationalism, with a particular focus on cyber nationalism, and conceptualize the "intermediary" level of nationalist expressions. I begin the discussion with situating Chinese nationalism into the broader nationalism literature. Then I critically engage with the "official vs. popular nationalism" paradigm in conceptualizing Chinese nationalism. Acknowledging its contributions, I nevertheless consider that the paradigm risks oversimplifying the composition and expression of Chinese nationalism by neglecting the complexities within each branch. Particularly, I argue that there exists an intermediary level between the official and the grassroots as represented by popular propagandists. Afterwards, I move to discuss China's official nationalism, intellectual nationalism and cyber nationalism as three distinctive branches of nationalism. In particular, I identify various factors impacting the evolvement of cyber nationalism and argue that it is more than a sub-category of popular nationalism. I conclude the chapter by giving out two sets of definitions of

cyber nationalism. It is broadly understood as "Online nationalist discourses in relation to China co/reproduced and disseminated by different actors including officials, intellectuals, (micro)celebrities, influencers and ordinary citizens", and narrowly defined as "online nationalist discourses in relation to China expressed by different actors and mediated through the distinctive practices, rituals, languages and (sub)cultures of cyberspace."

Chapter Three lays out the theoretical framework to understand popular propagandists' communication activities based on a critical engagement with propaganda literatures. Tracing the development of propaganda literature, I identify a shift from preoccupation with propaganda's normative concerns towards more critical perspectives that deconstruct propaganda as a form of political communication. I argue that while the normative debate is important, the insistence to draw a clear line between propaganda and "ethical communication" risks excluding certain forms of communications from examination. I thus call for a neutral and sociological perspective to study propaganda as a communication process involving various stakeholders. My theoretical position is in line with Ellul and Edelstein's theories of "total propaganda", which covers the totality of propaganda in society and moves beyond the professional propagandists and formal politics into the cultural realm. Both thinkers' theories are adjusted according to China's peculiar social, cultural and political contexts. Ellul's emphasis on coercion and denial of individual agency does not capture the Chinese state's positive "harnessing" of digital environment and the public's increasingly active online self-expression. Moreover, his insistence on propaganda being carried out by "organized groups" does not correspond to the increasingly diffusing and decentred nature of digital propaganda. Contrary to Ellul's

pessimism, Edelstein's view on the bottom-up "new propaganda" proves to be overoptimistic when applying to China, a case where popular culture co-evolves, rather than resists, authoritarianism.

Chapter Four lays out the methodology and research design. I first demonstrate how the conceptualization of nationalistic online key opinion leaders as popular propagandists fits into this thesis's theoretical position. These self-made media practitioners and online content producers are a crucial component of the dissemination and production of cyber nationalism. This discussion is followed by the mapping of active popular propagandists on Weibo, which addresses the "who" sub-question. Then I turn to discuss the research design, justify my case selection and sampling methods, which allows for the examination of most representative figures and the comparison between "everydayness" of "eventfulness" of propaganda. Next, I address the ontological, epistemological and methodological issues related to qualitative content analysis, followed by introducing the originally designed coding scheme capturing popular propagandists' communication habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles. The analytical strategy starts from an overview of coding results and move to the in-depth interpretation of the texts.

Chapter Five to Chapter Eight present the empirical findings. I begin with presenting an overview of popular propagandists' communications based on the quantification of codes in Chapter Five. The results help to illustrate the communication profiles and the most salient nationalism themes and propaganda tactics of different actors and different events. Moreover, the coding results also show how and to what extent the discussion of a specific political event can bring changes to popular propagandists' communications. These are important indicators for theorizing what types of

propaganda each case stands for. They also pave the way for in-depth qualitative interpretation of the text. Following the overview, the next three chapters focus on the textual level of the propaganda messages. Built on Chapter Five's findings, I explore how the salient propaganda tactics and nationalism themes manifest on the textual level and summarize the prominent narrative patterns in each case. The results reveal that each political event reflects distinctive propaganda styles and nationalism themes, and substantial variations exist in individual popular propagandist' narratives despite their generally pro-regime attitudes. The following Chapter Nine discusses the implications of these findings and how they relate back to propaganda and nationalism literatures. Both inter-case and intra-case variations in propaganda styles and nationalism themes are visited and explained. Particularly, I highlight the feature of nationalistic online opinion leaders as strategic communicators on top of popular propagandists and discuss the performative dimension of their communication activities. The conclusion chapter discusses the contributions and limitations of this research, as well as its broader implications to the study of China's (online) public opinions, cyber governance and digital (sub)cultures.

Chapter Two: Chinese Nationalism: Official, Grassroots and the Internet

Introduction

This thesis's theoretical framework contains two concepts, propaganda and nationalism, both of which are umbrella terms covering an array of definitions (Delanty & Kuma 2006; Auerbach & Castronovo 2013; Baines et al. 2019; Greenfeld & Wu 2020). They are at times conflated and used interchangeably, which can create conceptual confusion. Moreover, both concepts have since largely been developed and applied to phenomena in the western hemisphere, which is a problem for analysing China due to its peculiar social and political backgrounds distinct from the West (Callahan 2004; Liu 2019). The aim of this thesis is to leverage the explanatory power of propaganda and nationalism to understand the communication activities of popular propagandists and answers the overarching research question of how cyber nationalism is propagated by them. Propaganda provides the theoretical lens to understand various forms of political communications, influenced by different kinds of tactics, rhetoric, and ideological messages (Ellul 1965: 116-117; Hyzen 2021). Nationalism provides the contextual basis for the inquiry, as popular propagandists operate in an environment where the production of dissemination of nationalist narratives are encouraged (Luqiu 2020). On the empirical level, propaganda is treated as specific tactics, such as "informing" or "prescribing", in line with Ellul's definition of it as "set of methods" (Ellul 1965: 61), while nationalism is treated as different themes summarized from relevant literature, such as "anti-foreign" or "cohesion", which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

This chapter reviews literature on Chinese nationalism, with a particular focus on cyber nationalism. I critically engage with the most influential paradigm in conceptualizing Chinese nationalism as a division between a state-driven "official" nationalism and a society-initiated "popular" nationalism (Gries 2004; Anderson 2006; Zhang & Ma 2023: 899). This paradigm highlights the tensions between different branches of nationalist thoughts and expressions in China (Weiss 2014; Ma 2015; Zhang & Ma 2023). I argue that more diversified forms of interactions, such as convergence, co-optation, replacement and repudiation exist, which I will explain in this chapter. Moreover, I also caution against exaggerating the homogeneity within either "official" or "popular" nationalism but overlooking their internal complexity, especially when it comes to popular nationalism that seems to include everything except official "Party Speak" (Deans 2005). Using the examples of cyber nationalism, I demonstrate that a particular branch of nationalism contains various narratives, reflecting different views and featuring different expressions.

A comprehensive understanding of Chinese nationalism calls for more attention to the intermediary level of nationalist expressions. Nationalistic online key opinion leaders, whom I conceptualize as "popular propagandists", represent the intermediary level of Chinese nationalism. Emerging from China's digital sphere, popular propagandists are situated between the official and the grassroots. On the one hand, as self-made media practitioners, they are qualitatively different from professional propagandists or journalists who are based in government departments or official news outlets. On the other hand, boasting thousands or even millions of followers, they have disproportionately greater influence in online public sphere compared with ordinary netizens. Highlighting the role played by popular propagandists is a novel undertake

in two aspects. Firstly, it extends the inquiry scope of China's propaganda studies by taking the contents produced by online key opinion leaders seriously. Secondly, it goes beyond the "official vs. popular" paradigm in conceptualizing Chinese nationalism by highlighting the intermediary level represented by popular propagandists.

The following sections firstly discuss how Chinese nationalism relates to the broader nationalism literature, after which an overview of three different branches of Chinese nationalism is provided. Official nationalism mainly derives from the key thoughts of China's supreme leaders. Intellectual nationalism, a form of intermediary level of nationalism preceding cyber nationalism, contains a mixture of academic and vulgar expressions. Finally, cyber nationalism is reviewed for its evolvement and various factors impacting its formation and expression.

Chinese Nationalism: From Generality to Specificity

Three Archetypes of Nationalism

Nationalism is commonly understood either as a political movement or a belief (Barrington 2009: 9-10). When understood as a movement, nationalism is an organized endeavour to control the homeland (Dan Smith 1994; Brass 2014). In this thesis's context, nationalism is understood as a belief or an ideology that encourages individual members to give primary loyalty to their own ethnic or national community in order to build an independent nation state (Gellner 2008; Kohn 2017). When expressed, nationalism manifests as narratives that provide a sense of common identity, construct shared feelings and joint actions for members of a nation-state and emphasize the uniqueness and superiority of a nation over the others (Hoselitz 1956).

Liah Greenfeld summarized three archetypes of nationalism (Greenfeld 1996, 2019). The first type is individualistic/civic nationalism, represented by the ones originated in the UK and the USA. It considers the nation as an association of rational and autonomous individuals, who are capable of self-governing and planning for their own lives. Members in the nation are fundamentally equal, and national membership is voluntary, acquirable and renounceable, depending on whether one is willing to fulfil their civic duties. The second type of nationalism, represented by the one originated in France, is collectivist/civic in nature. It conceives the nation as a collective individual having its own will, which in turn imposes on its members. Members of community are not considered to be autonomous, if not mere organs of the collective individual. It retains the civic nature that prioritizes national achievements over ascriptive characteristics of the nation. Its membership, despite being collective and indivisible, remains voluntary. The third type, represented by the one originated in Russia, is collectivistic/ethnic type of nationalism. Its most distinctive feature is the conception of national membership based on ethnicity, which, different from the civic one, demands it to be biologically constituted. In other words, it sees the formation of nation of natural consequence, specific to its original environment and transmitted by blood. “Race” and “racism” often hold a central role in such type of nationalism. The Nazi regime, for example, used its notorious nationalist propaganda centred around the anti-Jewish and Arian-supremacism messages, to reconstruct a Germanic identity (Hagen 2008).

Thus, modern nationalism was born with individualistic and civic characteristics. Its evolvement, however, has seen the elevation and personification of the nation against the demise of individual rights and self-governing. This explains why nowadays the

very word of "nationalism" is commonly associated with monotheistic, if not authoritarian, civilizations (Greenfeld 2019: 81-83). China's contemporary nationalism belongs to the "collectivistic/ethnic" type. Its key features include defining the nation as a territorial-political unit, placing national interests before the rights of individual citizens, and stressing the importance of "Chinese blood" and "blood lineage" (Sautman 1997; Dikötter 1996). On the official level, such ethno-racial nationalism promotes national pride, stresses the uniqueness and greatness of Chinese civilization, highlights the nation's injustice suffered from foreign invaders in the 19th and 20th century, and projects the inevitable rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the future (Zhao 1998; Brown 2022). At the grassroots, it often manifests as racist and xenophobia nationalist expressions, particularly against minorities such as Black people and Muslims (Sautman 1994; Luqiu & Yang 2018). The collectivistic dimension foregrounds the leadership of the CPC as the protector of Chinese people and Chinese nation, whose authority is beyond doubt. It also has a realist/authoritarian dimension that promotes authoritarian values while dismissing liberalism, pluralism and democracy out of pragmatic rather than normative considerations (Inglehart 2007).

Official Nationalism vs. Popular Nationalism

Based on its sources and driving forces, Chinese nationalism is divided into a top-down official nationalism and a bottom-up popular nationalism (Anderson 2006). Official nationalism, whose status has been elevated to the pillar of its official ideology (Seckington 2006), refers to the Party-state's efforts to elicit nationalist sentiments to facilitate its policy goals and boost its legitimacy. Popular nationalism represents citizens' initiatives to construct their own nationalist discourses. Scholars are yet to

reach consensus on how popular nationalism interacts with official nationalism (Ma 2015; Han 2021: 719-722), but they generally agree upon the nature of popular nationalism as a double-edged sword (Gries 2004; Shirk 2007; Weatherly & Zhang 2017). On the one hand, it can echo with or be appropriated by official nationalism, facilitate the government's strategic goals, and hence enhance regime legitimacy (Kennedy 2009; Burcu 2022). On the other hand, the outburst of popular sentiments may spiral out of control, destabilize society, question the government's capacity, and lead to decreased regime support (Downs & Saunders 1999; Han 2021).

Regarding the relationship between official and popular nationalism, some scholars argue that the state has made tremendous efforts to cultivate, guide and co-opt popular nationalism to bring it in line with the Party's visions (Zheng 1999; Hladíková 2023). The ruling elites are seen as rational actors who tactfully manipulate popular nationalism for strategic purposes (Weiss 2014; Wallace & Weiss 2015). The campaign of patriotic education starting in the 1990s is an example of the Party's attempt to foster nationalistic sentiments in the public as the new official ideology replacing the increasingly unpopular communist ideology (McGregor 2011). As mass media flourishes in China, the Party sets the agenda for public discussions by highlighting or downplaying certain nationalistic episodes via editorial control (Zhang et al., 2012; Chan 2007). For example, Stockmann (2010) found that most official news outlets avoided reporting Japan-related issues in order to quell down the popular protests in 2005. Quickly adapting to the new information environment, Chinese government has upgraded cyber governance in order to more effectively manage nationalist sentiments on the Internet. Various measures have been taken including flooding social media platforms with government accounts and official news outlets

(Creemers 2017), "revolutionizing" the tone of online news report to be more investigative and objective (Repnikova & Fang 2019) and "reinvent" a more attractive state image to appeal to younger generations (Guo 2018).

Others, however, find that popular nationalism follows a strategic and voluntary approach in deciding whether to support or challenge the regime (Jiang 2012; Blanchette 2019). Susan Shirk (2007: 63), for example, points out the complexity of popular nationalism as it incorporates varying demands of Chinese populations of different backgrounds, which put substantial restraints on politicians' behaviours and decisions. Gries and his colleagues agree with this view and argue that the concern for political legitimacy forces decision-makers to pay more attention to popular demands when making foreign policies (Gries, et al. 2016). Weiss (2014: 17) argues that popular nationalism could serve as a "protective umbrella for domestic dissent" and poses a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the CPC. For examples, the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 and 2012 harboured dissatisfactions towards the government's "weak" responses towards foreign threats (Wallace & Weiss 2015; Stockmann 2010). Domestic protests due to land or labour disputes often strategically adopt nationalistic slogans to avoid incrimination (Pu & Scalan 2012). In response to such challenges from popular nationalism, the Party-state has repeatedly rejected "low-level red" (*diji hong*, 低级红), understood as preponderous, nauseating and exaggerated display of nationalism, and denounced it as "high-level black" (*gaoji hei*, 高级黑), an attack on the Party's legitimacy disguised as praises (Zhang & Ma 2023).

Rather than taking a side between the two camps, I argue that it is important to recognize that the interactions between official and popular nationalism involve

greater complexities than mere contentions, the nature of which often vary in different cases. Moreover, one needs to take the varying motivations and perspectives held by different stakeholders who are involved in the interactions of official and popular nationalism into consideration. The preoccupation with the contentions between the "official" and the "grassroots" risks homogenizing different actors' perspectives while missing the dynamic interactions within a specific branch of nationalism. In the above mentioned "high-level black, low-level red" episode, for example, some actors adopt a hyper-nationalistic tone as an undercover for the sarcastic criticisms of the regime, while others are simply pursuing "online traffic" (*liuliang,* 流量), which is the visibility, clickbait, and potentials to trigger discussions and exchangeable for greater fame and profits. The latter follows the logic of commercial nationalism, grown out of China's limited media commercialization which looks for sensational but politically correct materials to publish (Zhao 1998). More detailed discussions of commercial nationalism and how it evolves in the cyber space will be made in the following sections. Here, it suffices to demonstrate the complexity within popular nationalism.

The increasing scholarly interest in China's cyber nationalism in recent years rekindles the investigations on the relationship between official and popular nationalism. As Ma Yiben shrewdly points out, the most distinctive feature of China's cyber nationalism is its interactive and participatory nature, through which one could examine the encounter of various nationalist discourses (Ma 2015, 2018). Cyber nationalism has unprecedentedly encouraged China's nationalist expressions as the increasingly accessible ICTs empower the public as content producers. It has thus rendered nationalist expressions more complex and unpredictable due to the involvement of more grassroots actors and the volatility of meanings in the cybersphere (Yang & Tang

2018; Zhang et al. 2018; Chen & Wang 2019). Recognizing its potentials to empower individual expressions, many scholars emphasized the parallel between cyber nationalism and popular nationalism (Wu 2007; Wu 2014). Writing at the early stage of China's ICT development, many studies assumed the authenticity of online public opinions as regulations on the Internet were relatively relaxed compared with those for print media, radio and television (Lagerkvist 2005). The Internet was seen as a medium to channel popular nationalism, and cyber nationalism was viewed as an equivalent to the online expression of popular nationalism (Hyun & Kim 2015; Han 2019).

These pioneering work on China's cyber nationalism is right to point out how new media substantially lowered the threshold for ordinary people to engage nationalist expressions. Nearly three decades after Chinese public's access to the Internet, however, these perspectives require re-examination. To begin with, as the Chinese government steps up its control over the Internet, cyber nationalism is no longer dominated by the grassroots voices. As I have briefly mentioned in the second paragraph of this section, the state's upgraded cyber governance efforts suggest that official nationalism has made great inroads into the cyberspace, a point I shall further discuss in the following cyber nationalism section. Moreover, as the Internet and ICTs continue to develop in China, more scholars have realized the deficiency in simply treating the Internet as a "medium" for nationalist expressions. Instead, cyber nationalism is conceptualized as a distinctive phenomenon, which is closely associated with online communities and (sub)cultures (Wu et al. 2019; Chen et al. 2021; Wu & Fitzgerald 2023). One of the most representative works is the editorial book *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism* , where a group of scholars discuss how

nationalism has been "fandomized" through the distinctive rituals and practices by Chinese netizens (Liu 2018). Their work also notes the contentions between different online communities when engaging with online nationalist practices. These findings highlight the importance of digital (sub)cultures in the formation and expression of cyber nationalism. They also indicate that contentions not only exist between popular nationalism and official nationalism, but also within popular nationalism. I shall also further explain this point in the section of cyber nationalism.

The "official vs. popular" paradigm reveals the complexity of Chinese nationalism in its formation and expression depending on its sources and actors involved in its production and dissemination. The following sections introduce three different branches of typical Chinese nationalism, demonstrating their essence and evolvement.

Following the Leaders: China's Official Nationalism

The PRC's promotion of official nationalism is a direct response to the 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy movement. Deng Xiaoping, then de-factor leader of China, laid out the blueprint of official nationalism. He concluded that the government's preoccupation over economic development while downplaying ideological education in the 1980s contributed to this movement (Pei 2002). Holding no illusion over communist ideology's waning influence over the public, he remarked that China needed "patriotism" as the new pillar of its ideology (McGregor 2011). That said, Deng by no means "invented" China's nationalism, but merely reinvigorated certain themes which had already been laid down by early thinkers or long existed in the public's mind. To understand official nationalism, it is important to learn key historical moments prior to and after the foundation of the PRC.

The origin of Chinese nationalism is closely linked to the vigilance against foreign invasions and colonization, starting from the late 19th century's Opium War with the UK and reaching its climax in World War II against Japanese invaders (Dittmer & Kim 1993). This is quite different from the emergence of nationalism in Europe, which was encouraged by liberalism and mercantilism (Zhao 2004: 50; Greenfeld 2019: 33, 57). Saving the country (*jiuguo*, 救国), striving for national survival (*tucun*, 图存), and national self-determination, rather than individual freedom, were the corner stone of early Chinese nationalism, as reflected in the thoughts of pioneer nationalist thinkers such as Sun Yat-sen, Liang Qichao, and Chen Tianhua (Zhang 2023: 138). The pre-PRC history becomes an important source of the CPC's official nationalism, a period referred to as "century of humiliation". As Kaulfman (2010) points out, the "century of humiliation" narratives plays a significant role in influencing both the Chinese public and its elites' thinking about the world order. Though disagreeing on what position China ought to assume in the international system, the elites share the view that current international system has not fundamentally changed since the 19th century, which is composed of strong and weak nation-states that compete for dominance (Kaufman 2010; Lim 2015). Such perspective is a combination of realist thinking of international relations and a constant feeling of injustice that China has not achieved its entitled global status (Lynch 2009).

Promoting anti-foreign sentiments is a key component of official nationalism. The 1989 pro-democracy movement and the subsequent collapse of Soviet Union and regime changes in Eastern Europe alerted the Party of the danger from "foreign interference" to regime stability (Zhao 1998: 288). In response to these challenges, official nationalism highlighted anti-foreign sentiments and stressed the importance of

embracing the CPC's leadership. Originally in response to tangible foreign invasions, anti-foreign sentiments were rekindled and directed at perceived foreign threats and hostility, mostly the US and Japan due to their more recent enmity with China in the early and middle 20th century (Gries 2005; Rose 2010). The Party received elevated status in official nationalism's narratives as the only one who could protect the Chinese nation and Chinese people from threats and exploitations from both home and abroad. A carefully polished history of the Party's revolutionary path and nation-building process was presented to the public attesting to its "saviour status" (Zhao 1998: 296-297). Accompanying the "century of humiliation" narrative is an upbeat, victorious tone that China had become or remerged as a great power who followed an alternative path to the West, which was tailored-made for the country's peculiar conditions (Wang 2008; Wu 2014: 225).

The making of China's official nationalism is closely related to the thoughts of its paramount leaders. As a partially institutionalized Leninist Party (Lee 2010), the CPC's top leaders have enormous influences over the Party's ideology. As a Party-state, the politics and policies of China are in turn guided by the top leaders' visions and prospects. From Mao Zedong to current leader Xi Jinping, the PRC's official history recognizes five "core leadership" (*lingdao hexin*, 领导核心), whose major ideological and policy contributions are summarized as thought (*sixiang*, 思想), theory (*lilun*, 理论) or outlook (*guan*, 观) and written into constitution[2]. The following

[2] "Thought" is considered most important ideological contributions, while "outlook" the least important one. Moreover, whether the leader's own name appears on their ideological contribution is also an indication of its importance.

sections will discuss how each paramount leaders' thoughts contribute to China's official nationalism.

From Mao Zedong to Hu Jintao: Changes and Continuations

As the founder of the PRC, Mao Zedong's political visions have substantially shaped China's official nationalism. According to Kerry Brown (2012: 54), Mao considered unification and modernity as two crucial and inter-related issues for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. His conception of unification refers to both the geographical level (to gain independence from foreign and domestic hostile forces) and the psychological level (to unite all Chinese nationals with one overarching thinking). Modernity could not be achieved without unification, based on which the nation should further pursue wealth and strength. The establishment of a party-state, or a "proletarian people's democratic dictatorship under the leadership of the CPC", is the only way for China to achieve its modernity and unification (Brown 2012:56). Mao was dedicated to a highly utopian goal of eliminating the boundary between the party, the state and the people. In reality, however, such utopian outlook entailed "class struggles" against "capitalism" and "bourgeoise". For example, Mao waged a series of political campaigns between 1950s to 1970s, including "anti-rightist movement" (*fanyou yundon*, 反右运动), Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, systematically cracking down upon "class enemies" (*jieji diren*, 阶级敌人), who were in nature dissidents (Li 1996; Kraus 2010).

Mao's thoughts set the foundation of China's official nationalism, but his political campaign brought tremendous chaos to administration and society. As he passed away in 1976, Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, quickly renounced his overly radical and

utopian visions. Modernity and unification remained crucial themes in official nationalism but were given new interpretations. A more pragmatic approach achieving modernity stressing economic development, science and technology replaced the revolutionary "class struggle" (Chang 1996). Pronounced as "Reform and Opening up" or "Open-door Policy" (*gaige kaifang*, 改革开放), Deng's policy programme was to acknowledge private ownership and welcome more foreign investments in China. Regarding "unification", Deng stressed increasing cohesion and building consensus among elites by building a collectivistic leadership, as opposed to the Maoist personality cult (Deng & Lin 1989). Deng often acted as the mediator and arbitrator between the reformist and conservative factions within the Party when debates emerged on how to carry the reform forward[3]. Regarding territorial integrity and the "unification" with Taiwan, which remained in the control of KMT after the civil war, Deng for the first time took a conciliatory stance and called for "peaceful unification" instead of forceful "liberation". The idea was further developed in "*The Letter to Taiwan compatriots*" (*gao Taiwan tongbao shu*, 告台湾同胞书) and later elaborated as "One Country, Two System" (*yiguo liangzhi*, 一国两制) in the 1980s. Under this blueprint, Taiwan would be promised high level of autonomy after "unification".

Deng's reform transformed the Mao era's poverty-stricken China into an economic powerhouse, but also created new challenges for the Party. Increased individual freedom and access to foreign culture led to proliferation of liberalism and emboldened the expression of popular dissents to the Party (Gold 1984). Marketization

[3] The reformist faction, consisting of Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, stressed the need for bolder market reform and called for freer environment for cultural productions. The conservative faction, headed by Chen Yun and Li Peng, were proponents of planned economy and typically stressed the need to stick to orthodox Party ideology. See for example, the first-hand account from Zhao Ziyang (Zhao 2012).

and price reform encouraged "official profiteering" (*guandao*, 官倒) and corruption became rampant (Dittmer 1989). Popular dissents culminated in the 1989 pro-democracy movement, to which the Party responded with harsh crackdowns. Facing these challenges, Jiang Zemin, China's third supreme leader, further adjusted the position of official nationalism on key themes. Firstly, it became clear that the performance-based approach by delivering material goods to the public was insufficient to achieve "unification" nor "modernity". Unification should go beyond territorial integrity and consensus within the elite, and reemphasized the Maoist approach of psychologically uniting the mass with the Party. Similarly, China's modernization cannot be achieved without the firm leadership of the Party. Secondly, the split in top leadership that fuelled the pro-democracy movement (Liang et al., 2001: 184-191; Zhao 2012: 15-24) suggested that collective leadership still required a "leadership core" (*lingdao hexin*, 领导核心）who had the final say over diverging opinions. Jiang's responses were, on the one hand, engineered the campaign of patriotic education (Wang 2008), which targeted the young population by heavily increasing the proportion of nationalist tutorial in their curriculums. Tasked with Deng's visions, Jiang was the first leader to concretize official nationalism and elevated its ideological importance over communism (Zhao 1998). On the other hand, Jiang frequently referred to himself as "leadership core" in official discourses, consolidating his status as the supreme leader. Notwithstanding his resistance to democratization, Jiang continued Deng's economic liberalization in carrying further the market reform and, for the first time, welcoming entrepreneurs to join the Party.

Despite being a "weak" leader overshadowed by Jiang's legacy and quickly taken over by Xi's assertive leadership (Chen 2021), Hu Jintao breathed new life into China's

official nationalism. His most important ideological contribution "Scientific Outlook on Development" (*kexue fazhan guan,* 科学发展观) developed Jiang's "Important Thoughts of Three Represents" (*sange daibiao*, 三个代表) in response to China's surging inequality and social unrest, side effects of breakneck economic growth of the Jiang era. The overarching theme of unification was given new interpretations as "harmony" (*hexie*, 和谐） and "cohesion" (*ningju*, 凝聚) (Brown 2017: 58-59). A "harmonious society" first and foremost requires stability, after which a fairer economic system and more sustainable development model should be put in place (Howell & Duckett 2019). "Cohesion" could only be achieved with the unity between the Party and the people, between Taiwan and the mainland, and between people from different ethnic, economic and social backgrounds (Edney 2012: 907). Moreover, the Hu era channelled renewed national pride into China's modernity, deriving from its growing national power and elevated international status. The success of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo epitomized Chinese people's reinvigorated national pride with the vision of an open, strong, inclusive civilization alternative to the West (Brady 2009).

Xi Jinping: The Revisionist or the Synthesizer?

Central to the official nationalism laid out by Xi is three reassertions: re-asserting the supreme leader's control over the Party, re-asserting the Party's control over the state, and re-asserting the Party-state's control over society (Mai 2017). Phil Entwistle (2018: 5-7) points out that such reassertions manifest on both structural and ideological aspects. Structurally, Xi has introduced a more personalised leadership in the top-echelon of the Party-state, abolishing term limits to allow himself to be

President-for-life, purging his rivals and stuffing Politburo Standing Committee, the de-facto highest power organ of China, with his loyalists (The Economist 2015; Wang & Zeng 2016). Proposing "top-level design" (*dingceng sheji*, 顶层设计), Xi reallocates decision-making powers from government to Party institutions, breaking the informal "division of labour" (Heilmann 2016; Lee 2017). On the societal level, limited ideological freedom has been further curtailed as Xi demands higher obedience from business, lawyers, journalists and scholars to the Party line (Shieh 2018). The need for maintaining stability has been given renewed emphasis as the security apparatus under Xi acts decisively to crack down dissents, including the Uyghurs minorities in Xinjiang (Zenz 2019), the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protestors (Chung 2020) and overseas activities (Benner et al. 2018).

Ideologically, Xi is determined to elevate the importance of ideology in the governance of both the Party and society (Ahlers & Stepan 2016; Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). Dickson (2014) observes the widespread utilitarian perspective of Party membership (i.e., for career advancement) for both Party and non-Party members in China. Xi hits out at the loss of faith of Party members as a spiritual malaise that leads to "political deterioration, economic greed, moral degeneracy and corruption of life" (Xi 2013b). Holding no illusion over ideology's waning influence, Xi drastically changed the expressive style of official nationalism. A new blueprint for China's modernity has been laid out according to Xi Jinping Thought, whose full name is "*Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*" (*Xi Jinping xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang*, 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想). Instead of stiff "Party speak", Xi highlighted down-to-earth phrases such as "China Dream", "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" that ordinary people can relate

to (Brown 2022: 183). He also stressed the Party's leading role to lead the Chinese nation and Chinese people to these goals through the "Chinese path", as opposed to the "Western civilization" (Xi 2013a). The "rejuvenation" and "China Dream" narratives of official nationalism are a clear indication of the Party's attempt to rediscover the pre-modern China for contemporary use. China's rejuvenation, in other words, lies not only in the future, but also in its glorious past (Brown 2022). The "China Dream" narratives exemplify the collectivist nature of Chinese nationalism, explicitly linking the realization of "individual dreams" to the realization of "national dreams". Idealization of the Chinese nation under Xi fuses China's communist and pre-communist histories, underlying a dialectical relationship between the individual and the nation, with the former often asked to forego their personal interests for the sake of national interest.

Internationally, China's official nationalism under Xi features an increased assertiveness both in projecting China's own image as a "major country" (*daguo,* 大国) and in dealing with other countries (Wang 2019). With China's global status ascending, Xi has departed from the enduring motto of "hide and bide" (*taoguang yanghui*, 韬光养晦) set by Deng Xiaoping to guide China's foreign policy. Such position was that China should remain low profiled and avoid seeking leadership role in international affairs before it accumulated enough strength. Moreover, despite China's growing strength, it would stick to the road of "peaceful development" and never seek hegemony. Under President Xi, however, the rhetoric took a more assertive turn. The talk of China's need for "peaceful rise" has given way to "confident rise" and "dare to fight" spirits (Dai & Luqiu 2022). China is to become a "major country" that shoulders the responsibility as global leader and creates a "shared future for all

mankind". Regarding the "unification" with Taiwan, Xi also renounces the conciliatory rhetoric of Deng and claims that the Taiwan issue "cannot be passed on from generation to generations" (CPC News 2019). The assertive rhetoric goes along with the PRC's increasingly bold military manoeuvre in the Taiwan Strait, leading to heightened regional tensions. The domestic effect of Xi's foreign policy is the increase of national pride and assertiveness among Chinese people, a point I will be exploring in Chapter Six and Chapter Eight.

For all his significance, Xi's contribution to official nationalism should not be exaggerated. Despite some scholars' concern for a "Maoist revival" (Lam 2012; Zhao 2016), the nationalism project of Xi is fundamentally different from Mao's due to his resistance to mass participation (Entwistle 2018: 8) and his embrace of pre-PRC's cultural traditions (Kubat 2018)[4]. Xi's rediscovery of pre-PRC cultural traditions is to further consolidate the legitimacy of the Party as the "natural, default inheritor of Chinese civilisational heritage while at the same time claiming the role of being its only legitimate carrier into the future" (Kubat 2018: 78). Moreover, despite his drastic changes in both formal and informal rules of China's elite politics, Xi remains more of a synthesizer rather than a revisionist figure. For example, the "core socialist values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*, 社会主义核心价值观), one of his key contributions, is a revamping of the same slogans firstly voiced by Hu Jintao (Gow 2017). The so-called "Maoist revival" can be traced to the Hu era, reflected by the symbolic move of visiting Jinggangshan (one of the cradles of China's communist revolution) at the start of his tenure, and his fondness of mass campaigns to promote

[4] Mao, despite his personal like of Chinese history, fiercely attacked Chinese traditions as "Four Olds" (*sijiu*, 四旧) during Cultural Revolution.

official nationalism (Brown 2012: 60-62). Last but not least, modernity and unification remain the two underlying themes of official naitonalism, with pre-revolutionary cultural traditions, the Party's all-round leadership role and increasing assertiveness added to their interpretation.

To sum up, official nationalism, with the underlying themes of unification and modernity, bears great significance to the PRC's nation-building process. The supreme leaders' major ideological contributions bear crucial implications to its formation and expressions. The legitimacy of the Party-state, the vigilance towards external threats, the cohesion generated between different groups of people and a sense of national pride are among the key messages conveyed by different leaders. What needs to be further explored is the popularization process of official nationalism, understood as how it is propagated among the Chinese public in the digital era and how ordinary Chinese people make sense of such messages. More importantly, it is crucial to examine how it interacts with, influences and be influenced by other branches of nationalism in China.

Rationality or Vulgarity? China's Intellectual Nationalism

Emergence and Development

The limited liberalization since the 1980s opened up new spaces for the formation and expression of nationalism by non-state actors. Nationalism has gained influence among Chinese intellectuals since 1990s, whose narratives are not necessarily in line with top leaders or mass movements (See for example, Zhao (1997)'s discussion of intellectuals' nationalist expressions). Wu Guanjun argues that the "official vs. popular" division of Chinese nationalism overlooks "intellectual nationalism" as a

distinctive thought system and ideological trend. He conceptualizes intellectual nationalism as "nationalist trend in the intellectual circles" (Wu 2014: 224-225), represented by either the academic works such as the history of contemporary Chinese nationalism (Luo 1998) and the revival of nationalism in post-reform China (Ren 2004), or popular writings published by intellectuals without academia affiliation, such as *China Can Say No*, *China's Path in the Shadow of Globalization* and *China is Unhappy*. Popular nationalism refers to "nationalistic sentiments expressed in everyday life, especially large-scale events such as the anti-foreign demonstrations of recent years" and "violent expressions of these nationalistic sentiments" on the Chinese Internet (Wu 2014: 225). The official, intellectual and popular nationalism are inter-related but distinctive from each other. In other words, the most crucial determinants of these three types of nationalism, according to Wu, is the actors involved in its production and dissemination. Official nationalism is the narratives of Party elites; intellectual nationalism is expressed by Chinese intellectuals; and popular nationalism by ordinary citizens.

The emergence of China's intellectual nationalism coincides with the rise of "anti-foreign resentment" in the 1990s, in a sharp contrast to the "open-minded optimism" in the 1980s (Unger 2016). China-based scholar Chen Shaoming expressed his bewilderment at the rise of intellectual nationalism as such militarism was "unimaginable" in the 1980s (Chen 2000: 389). Scholars hold different views on the source of China's contemporary intellectual nationalism. Peter Gries attributed its origin to the Party-state's successful "patriotic education" in the wake of 1989 pro-democracy movement, which led to the rise of nationalism sentiments among students (Gries 2004). Some, however, argued that it was China's impressive economic

performance that emboldened Chinese intellectuals to adopt a more positive narrative of China (Li 1999).

China-based scholar Xu Jinlin gives a thorough account on the development of China's intellectual nationalism. Three waves of intellectual nationalism, or "anti-Westernism" (*fanxifang zhuyi*, 反西方主义), have emerged in China since 1989. The first wave was spearheaded by He Qing, who had close affiliations with the Party. He published a series of anti-West essays in the early 1990s but failed to make major impacts in the intellectual circle. The second wave features three different scholarly trends: the "post-colonial cultural criticism" represented by Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming, the call for "institutional innovation" represented by Cui Zhiyuan and Gan Yang, and the "civilizational comparison" thesis raised by Sheng Hong (Xu 2011). The publication of several books containing strong nationalism appeals, represented by *China Can Say No*, *China's Path in the Shadow of Globalization* and *China is Unhappy*, epitomized the third wave. These books have not only received intellectuals' attentions, but also managed to rouse the interest from the public. The third wave also solidifies "Chinese nationalist" as an intellectual label and shared identity for a group of scholars including Ma Lijun, Cao Hongju, Wang Xiaodong and Song Qiang. For example, Ma and Cao considered themselves belonging to the same "say no club" (*shuobu juleb*, 说不俱乐部), a clear reference to *China Can Say No* (Ma & Cao 1999: i-v).

Since then, intellectual nationalism has become an unabating trend in China's ideological landscape and continues to hold significant influence in recent years. Scholars and academicians such as Zhang Weiwei, Chen Ping, Shen Yi, Jin Canrong

and Chu Yin, have achieved prominence by making ultranationalist comments on China's social media platforms about racial and geopolitical issues (Burcu & Wang 2023: 422; Sullivan & Wang 2023: 80). It is worthwhile to point out that that, though dubbed as "intellectual nationalism", the vast majority of such narratives are to be differentiated from proper academic works or intellectual debates due to their vulgar and, in many instances, ethically problematic nature. Zhang, Chen, Jin, for example, have been infamous for their blind confidence in China's superiority over other countries in almost all aspects ranging from economy to culture. Shen and Chu are often celebrated for their far right, "politically incorrect" statements in opposing racial justice, diversity and liberalism. In a sense, they have echoed with the nasty tone set by President Xi himself when he met with overseas Chinese in Mexico in 2009: "Some foreigners, with their full bellies, have nothing better to do but pinpoint their fingers at China." The freshest wave of intellectual nationalism, therefore, witnessed growing activeness of scholars' participation in producing nationalism narratives, who nevertheless prioritize assertiveness and sensationalism over academic integrity. Such development has worried some established scholars in China. For example, Yan Xuetong, the Tsinghua professor who is known for his hawkish stance, voices his concern for such "xenophobia" going too far (Zheng 2022).

Components of Intellectual Nationalism

The propositions and composition of China's intellectual nationalism is best illustrated by Wang Xiaodong's writings (Wang et a. 1999; Wang 2003; Wang et al. 2009). Treating ethnicity (*minzu*, 民族) and race (*zhongzu*, 种族) as key components, Wang often uses "racism" (*zhongzu zhuyi*, 种族主义) and "nationalism" (*minzu zhuyi*, 民族

主义) interchangeably in his writings. For example, he criticizes the "liberal leaning" documentary River Elegy (*heshang,* 河殇) for its "reverse racism" (*nixiang zhongzu zhuyi,* 逆向种族主义) (Wang et al. 1999: 188-189). His conflations of the two terms on the one hand suggest the conceptual confusion of "race" and "ethnicity" in China's intellectual nationalism, and on the other hand insinuates its xenophobic tendency. Engaging Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilization* thesis, Wang argues that "clashes among ethnic groups" led to the rise of nationalist thoughts in China (Wang et al. 1999: 218-222). He also considers "economic elements", such as fighting for scarce resources and safeguarding national interests, is among the fundamental goals of Chinese nationalism has to achieve (Wang et al. 1999: 161-163).

The political proposition of intellectual nationalism reflects militarism. It argues that military power is a prerequisite and guarantee for a strong economy. Various historical and cultural accounts are used to support the claim that militarism is a characteristic of the Chinese race. The spirit of "upholding militancy" (*shangwu jingshen,* 尚武精神) belongs to one of China's most precious "ancient cultural gene" (*wenhua jiyin,* 文化基因) (Wang et al., 1999: 12). The Chinese nation should be led by "true heroes" and "knight errant" (*xiake,* 侠客) who "inherit the spirit of upholding militancy" and are capable of "killing a person in every ten steps" (Wang et al., 1999: 15, 380). On the international stage, a "heroic" Chinese state can offer the world "true management and leadership and eradicate evils from the entire human race" (Wang et al., 2009: 10, 15-16). To achieve this aim, China must firstly "break itself from the West", and "control resources lying beyond our borders" (Wang 2008). Intellectual nationalism does not shy away from the expressions of expansionism: "The PLA should reach

every single corner of the world where China's core economic interest lies…We must do business with swords in our hands at the same time." (Wang et al. 2009: 182-199).

The writings of intellectual nationalism tend to treat two nations in particular as China's hypothesized enemies: the United States and Japan (Wang et al. 1999; Wang 2003). The following writings from Wang Xiaodong are best examples to showcase such hostility: "Whether Japan is able to invade China again and commit a 'Beijing massacre' depends on whether China can strengthen itself…… If we are not as strong as the enemy, then we should spend ten years sharpening our swords. When the time is ripe, we shall seek revenge (Wang et al., 1999: 42). On another occasion, he writes: "China must make sure that it can eliminate a hundred thousand US soldiers in a war. Such capability is the true guarantee of our peace and security" (Wang 2003: 25). As reflected from his writings, an imminent yet imaginary threat is often manufactured in intellectual nationalism's narratives. The "Beijing massacre" describes by Wang is not likely to happen, but it is the imaginary threat that really matters to intellectual nationalism. The duality of peace and war is also embedded intellectual nationalism. War is justified as a means for the pursuit of peace as an end, and it is therefore justifiable (Wang 2008).

Apart from militarism, another distinctive feature of intellectual nationalism is its obscenity (Cheng 2011; Wu 2014: 247). Nationalism is a gendered ideology and is narratives are disproportionately dominated by the males (Peterson 2007). China's intellectual nationalism has produced a tremendous amounts of sexualized discourses focusing on the bodies of Chinese women (Wu 2014: 248). China's (male) nationalists have also harboured a feeling of anxiety based on the assumptions that foreign (white) males are luring Chinese women away (Gries 2004). Examples of such anxiety are

anecdotal accounts presented in *China Can Say No*. For example, a rumour went that a US man named "Mark" would randomly and relentlessly hunting for Chinese women for sex (Song et.al 1996: 60). Moreover, Chinese netizens would leave complimentary comments for Chinese men having sex with white women on some porn sites (Wu 2014: 241). Wang Xiaodong once argued that "women's bodies" belonged to the "big picture" of Chinese nationalists, which were the "fundamental interest of Chinese men" beyond the understanding of Western scholars (Wang et al. 1999: 125, 132). The nastiness reflected from his writings perfectly summarize the patriarchal logic of China's intellectual nationalism: "The most fundamental interest of Chinese men" prompts Chinese nationalists to "uphold the spirit of militarism", drives them to embrace racism and xenophobia, and most importantly, protect "the bodies of Chinese women" from foreigners" (Wang et al., 1999: 188-189, 133). He would straightforwardly acknowledge that "beautiful Chinese women" should belong to Chinese men (Wang et al. 1999: 132). In short, the narratives of China's intellectual nationalism reduce China to "Chinese men", and "we" to a boy scout.

Before the advent of cyber nationalism, intellectual nationalism is an example of an intermediary level between official and grassroots nationalism. On the one hand, it was encouraged by the reinvigorated official nationalism after the 1989 student movement, which promoted the anti-foreign and China-centric messages. However, its expressions tend to simplify and vulgarize official nationalism by reducing the latter's grand narratives and patriarchal logic to an emphasis on anti-foreign sentiments and obscene narratives. On the other hand, the messages of intellectual nationalism have gone beyond the academic community and influenced public opinions (Xu 2001). The narratives of intellectual nationalism in the 1990s and early

2000s, highlighting xenophobia, racist and sexist messages, continue to exert its influence nowadays and remain key components of cyber nationalism (Wu 2007; Blanchette 2019). It remains to be seen how the digital context highlights or downplays different messages of intellectual nationalism, and whether public intellectuals and academics remain the most vocal producers in cyber nationalism.

When Nationalism Meets Digital (sub)Cultures: China's Cyber Nationalism

The fundamental difference between intellectual nationalism and cyber nationalism lies in the actors involved in their productions. Intellectual nationalism belongs to a fixed group of people who identify themselves as, for example, the "say no club". The production of cyber nationalism, however, is not restricted to specific groups of actors, leading to more diversified narratives and more unpredictable and volatile meanings embedded in its messages. As a relatively new phenomenon, scholars have yet to reach consensus on how to conceptualize China's cyber nationalism. Wu Xu, one of the pioneers in this field, remarks that it is a "new phenomenon in China's political arena and ideological spectrum" nurtured and facilitated by online technology, which is different from the scripted official discourses (Wu 2007: 3). Li Hongmei notes that cyber nationalism's "anti-West stance" still follows the "reactive" logic of China's historical nationalism (Li 2018). Such perspective highlights the Internet's empowerment of individual expressions and its typical rhetoric styles. However, it stops short of contemplating how the digital context impacts the formation of cyber nationalism and how the producers of cyber nationalism make sense of their activities. Thus, it is shrewd for Liu Hailong to point out the influences from digital and

commercial (sub)cultures on the formation of cyber nationalism (Liu 2018). Moreover, Yang Guobin contends that cyber nationalism provides strong emotional attachment, sources of personal identity, as well as a sense of belonging to those engage in its production (Yang 2018: 5). He further expresses his concerns that untamed cyber nationalism often contains explicit expansionism in their talk about building a Chinese "empire" (Yang 2018: 10). Both Yang and Liu are correct to acknowledge the influences from the digital context and other branches of nationalism towards cyber nationalism, but I argue that the conceptualization of cyber nationalism should go further and elucidate its relationship with official and popular nationalism. This sections gives an overview of the history of cyber nationalism in China and lays out this thesis's definition based on critical engagement with previous literatures.

Cyber Nationalism in its Embryo: Critical Nationalism

Wu Jing and his colleagues observe three waves of cyber nationalism in China (Wu et al. 2018). The first wave arrived following Chinese public's access to the Internet. China's early cyber nationalism grew out of public anger towards foreign threats or insults towards the Chinese nation and Chinese people and a frustration towards the perceived weakness in Beijing's response (Wu 2007: 35). Therefore, its narratives tended to be critical towards both foreign and the Chinese government, and the latter found the angry "nationalist cyber tiger" hard to tame (Hughes 2000). The Chinese government was often criticized for not doing enough to protect China's national interest and dignity, and imposing excessive censorship to contain nationalist expressions (Weiss 2014: 105). The first wave of cyber nationalists were mostly well-educated people, most of whom were university students. Due to the Internet's low penetration rate in China at that time, early netizens tended to receive higher education

or have a better socio-economic status (Li 2018). For example, students of Peking University and Tsinghua University, the most prestigious higher education institutions of China, spearheaded the online nationalist uproar towards the racial violence against Chinese migrants in Malaysia (May 1998), the NATO's bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade (1999) and the 2001 Sino-US plane crash (2001).

Cyber nationalism is a result of netizens' engagement with the complex socio-technic system (Schneider 2023: 170). On top of users, the Internet infrastructure impacts how nationalist narratives are propagated online. The first wave of cyber nationalism was disseminated and co/reproduced on online news commentary forum (BBS). A feature of Web 1.0 and 2.0, BBS-based nationalism narratives are mostly driven by producers or operators of a particular platform. These features are different from the following waves based on Web 3.0 contexts and beyond, which are of greater interactivity and more closely related to platform mechanisms. The "critical" nature of the first wave was also reflected in the infrastructure aspect, as cyber nationalists strived to achieve greater autonomy by establishing non-official nationalist discussion forums. For example, growing number of netizens ditched Strong Nation Forum (*qiangguo luntan*, 强国论坛), a BBS operated by the official media People's Daily, and switched to "Iron Blood Community" founded by a student of Tsinghua in response to the former's increasing censorship (Huang & Li 2003). On top of their critical stance towards the government, early cyber nationalists also pursued nationalist activism and displayed reflexivity and deliberations in their practices. For example, in response to Japan's transgression on Chinese territory, several online communities launched the crowdfunding campaign "Defending Diaoyu Island" in 2003 to support civilians "occupying" the island. Commenting on this event, a report by International Herald

concluded that cyber nationalists "showed more critical reflections on narrow xenophobia and was more well organized" compared with the "say-no-club" intellectual nationalism in the 1990s (Li 2003).

To sum up, the first wave of China's cyber nationalism was mainly produced and disseminated on BBS, and the participants were mainly well-educated university students. The perceived humiliation suffered by the Chinese nation due to foreign threats, and a weak, incompetent government tended to be its trigger. Strikingly, China's early cyber nationalism was considered as reflective by both popular and academic writings (Min 2009; Li 2003). It rejected an unconditional support for the Party-state, which made the government nervous and vigilant against this newly emerged force and often resorted to suppression and censorship.

Consumer Nationalism and Digital (sub)Culture

Starting from 2008, the second wave of cyber nationalism coincides with a generational change in Internet users. The post-1980s generation took over the post-1970s generation as the dominant netizen group (Wu et al. 2018: 38). The younger generation of cyber nationalists were subject to new influences in shaping their nationalist narratives. First, China's rapid economic development in the first decade of the 21st century brought forth consumer nationalism, understood as "the invocation of individuals' collective national identities in the process of consumption to favour or reject products from other countries" (Wang 2005: 225). Consumer nationalism China's "boycott culture" where the public, either voluntarily or encouraged by the state, refuse to buy goods from companies or countries which have "insulted China" or "hurt Chinese people's feelings". While some incidents were triggered by missteps

in advertisements or public relations that angered Chinese consumers, some companies fell victim to the geopolitical conflict between China and their countries. For example, the Chinese public staged a boycott to the French supermarket chain Carrefour in 2008 and the South Korean company Rakuten 2016 in protest against the two countries' criticism, policies or strategic moves targeting China (Nyíri 2009).

Apart from the boycott culture, consumer nationalism also highlights the convergence of commercialism and politics, and the performance of cultural identity (Liu 2018: 143). Jiang (2012: 8) explores the complex relationship between nationalism and consumerism in Chinese cyberspace and argues that the government, in promoting consumerism, has granted Chinese netizens of greater freedom in expressing their opinions and stimulated an online consumer culture with "the dual purpose of encouraging personal freedoms, but also a common consumer identity". The Party has also manipulated the public's nationalistic sentiments in various "hurt feelings" episodes and utilized it as a means to discipline public behaviours (Bandurski 2016). For example, the phrase "hurt feeling" was written into the draft Public Security Administration Punishments Law in 2023 to punish behaviours that "damage China's national spirit, hurt Chinese nationals' feelings" (*yousun zhonghuaminsu jingshen, shanghai zhonghua minzu ganqing*, 有损中华民族精神，伤害中华民族感情).

Apart from consumer nationalism, digital (sub)cultures also made inroads into cyber nationalism, as more digital (sub)cultural communities such as gaming and K-pop fans participate in the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalism narratives. China's digital (sub)cultures started to develop in the mid-1990s (Yang 2018: 4), a time of "unprecedented disenchantment" when Chinese society and citizens were going through "a crisis of faith" due to rapid development of commercial culture and

individualism (Yan 2020). The Internet provided the disenchanted Chinese public with a new space for rediscovering meaning, happiness and social imaginary (Taylor 2004). The growing popularity of BBS forums and online gaming offered the "re-enchantment" for Chinese netizens to experience alternative lives, identities and social realities (Yang 2003). Similar to consumer nationalism, the convergence of digital (sub)culture and cyber nationalism encourages self-expression and allowes previously marginalized (sub)cultural groups to participate in the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalism messages. Nationalist messages produced by China's digital (sub)culture groups simultaneously contained criticisms and frustrations towards the excessive regulations of their subcultural practices as well as sincere patriotism wishing to be recognized by the mainstream culture (Li 2018; Liu 2018). They did not necessarily care about China's foreign policy or geopolitical events and tended to practice nationalism through mundane events, such as celebrating team China's achievements in sports tournament or their gaming victory over foreign players.

While practicing cyber nationalism, members of different online groups have combined their collective identity acquired from the (sub)cultural communities with their national identity and developed "a certain type of patriotic feelings and political consciousness related to nationalism during everyday subcultural consumption" (Wu et al. 2018: 40-41). Therefore, tensions between different subcultural communities could transform into contentious nationalist narratives, a famous example being "June 9th Jihad" (*liujiu shengzhan*, 六九圣战), an infamous online trolling between China's gaming otakus (mostly males) and K-pop fans (mostly females). In their research of China's *fenqing* (愤青, angry youth), Yang and Zheng (2012) choose the "Jihad" as

one of the case studies demonstrating the complexity within this group. They point out that some participants were subject to various "social anxiety and dissatisfaction due to pressure for survival and social problems widely exist" and used this occasion simply to "vent their resentment" (Yang & Zheng 2012: 649). However, they do not go further to unpack how their (digital) identities influence their practices. The "Jihad" was driven by a various factors including patriotic duties, hostility between different fandoms and the gendered nationalism (Gao & Stanyer 2013). The tactics and contents of this nationalistic episode were a combination of chauvinistic slogans and spoofing practices typical of gamers' communities (Wu et al., 2018: 39). This incident demonstrates the complexity within China's cyber nationalism under the influence of various digital (sub)cultures. It further suggests that the second wave of cyber nationalism, in comparison with its predecessor, moved beyond formal political events and encouraged the (re)production of nationhood and ethnicity in people's everyday practice.

Key opinion leader and The Angry Youth

The last but not the least crucial feature of the second wave cyber nationalism is the rise of online key opinion leaders. Investigating nationalism incidents such as Carrefour boycott and Olympic torch relay, Zhao (2013) argues that prominent individual netizens manage to come up with more diversified discourses and exert influence on public opinions aside from the agenda set by mainstream media. Yao Jing, a Tsinghua University graduate, founded the independent nationalist website "AC April". Ren Chonghong, a Tongji University graduate, published an opinion editorial titled *Grand Mission: The Political Negotiation between Us and the World* as the manifesto for the self-made "Industrial Party". Tang Jie, originally a co-founder of

"AC April", established his own site "Exclusive" and produced the renowned anime series "*Me and My Country Engine*", explaining various Chinese political terminologies such as Five-year plan and mass approach. This group of young nationalists received media attention dubbing them as "angry youth" (*fen qing*, 愤青): a group of passionate individuals who nevertheless show sophistication in their knowledge and reasoning (Osnos 2008). However, equalling "*fen qing*" to rational patriots is a simplistic view. Yang and Zheng's (2012) research summarized three different types of *fenqing* on the Chinese Internet: the patriotic ones, the China-critical ones and resentment-venting ones. The composition, practice and focus of the three groups are different from each other. The patriotic *fenqing* focus mostly on foreign events while the China-critical ones on domestic events. Resentment-venting *fenqing* overlaps with China's online gaming and hacker communities and have little interest in political discussions (Yang & Zheng 2012: 649). The *fenqing* phenomenon attests to the complex formation of cyber nationalism, which consists of different groups of actors holding contending views.

China-based scholars, for their part, dub these actors as "media intellectuals" (*meijie zhishi fenzi*, 媒介知识分子) or the "Internet intellectuals" (*wangluo zhishi fenzi*, 网络知识分子). Some cite their positive effects of knowledge dissemination and public education (Huang 2019). However, mainstream academia voiced critical views towards the "mediatization" of intellectuals. Media intellectuals could bring substantial damages to the knowledge fields by sacrificing the standards of intellectual inquiry in exchange for greater media publicity (Lin & Zhang 2010). Some, in order to appeal to the public, might construct a celebrity persona at the cost of their academic integrity. In a different context, Pierre Bourdieu criticized the psychological

transformation of intellectuals who frequently appeared on mass media as “fast thinkers”, who expressed views in a fast, simplistic and media-friendly way (Bourdieu 1998: 29).

Bourdieu’s views are echoed by Chinese scholar Zhao Yong, who criticized some of his media-frantic intellectual colleagues as “know-hows” (*zhidao fenzi*, 知道份子), whose fast thinking and simplistic judgement disregard their social responsibility. He lamented such phenomenon as the cynicism of some Chinese intellectuals (Zhao 2009). In short, China-based scholars generally agreed that a too close relation between media and intellectuals is problematic, and the popularity of media intellectuals would inevitably lead to the “degeneration” of the intellectual community (Chen 2010; Ding & Wu 2010). The debates within China’s academia regarding the “media/Internet intellectuals” cautions us against treating prominent online figures as “public intellectuals”, who objectively pursue social justice and common good. Media sensations and the subsequent limelight are key factors influencing their dissemination of cyber nationalism.

To sum up, the second wave of China’s cyber nationalism saw the proliferation of nationalism forums, websites and online communities. The production and dissemination of cyber nationalism was no longer restricted to BBS or nationalist forums, but increasingly on other “neutral” platforms, such as Baidu Tieba. Ordinary netizens have also become more involved in the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalist narratives. A group of well-informed and passionate nationalists rose to prominence as online key opinion leaders. Despite the critics from China-based academics on the media/Internet intellectuals, I argue that investigating the activities of nationalistic online key opinion leaders are key to understanding the propagation of

cyber nationalism in China. Situated between ordinary netizens and government actors, their nationalist expressions shed light on the long-neglected intermediary level of Chinese nationalism.

Multifaceted Cyber Nationalism

The third and latest wave of cyber nationalism witnesses the much younger post-1990s generation coming to the forefront in the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalist narratives (Jiang 2012; Yang 2018). Apart from the generational change, the boundary between "nationalistic" and "non-nationalistic" platforms has further broken down, due to the advent of Web 3.0, the popularization of social media platforms and the nudge from the Party-state (Wu et al., 2018: 41; Chen et al., 2021). On the one hand, the previously nationalistic platforms such as Strong Nation Forum and Iron Blood Forum have been goaded into official forums whose contents are subject to heavy censorship. On the other hand, "apolitical" platforms such as Tudou, Youku and Douban were subject to tighter regulations and censorships as the government launches waves of the "Internet clearance campaigns" (*jingwang xingdong*, 净网行动). Moreover, though being a late comer to Web 1.0, China quickly adapts to the new digital environment of Web 3.0 and beyond by developing its own social media platforms featuring greater user interactivity, data interoperability and smarter algorithms. Most social media platforms in China do not brand themselves as "nationalistic" as certain BBS forums mentioned above. However, the requirement of "political correctness" and clickbait-driven sensationalism have made nationalism among the few permissible areas for more relatively free and diversified political expressions (Speelman 2023). Apart from the X-like platform Sina Weibo, other

platforms designed for special fandom groups such as Bilibili and Douban, and even foreign platforms such as X and YouTube, have also become potential sites for the proliferation of China's cyber nationalism (Huang & Wang 2021; Gong 2022). The latest wave of cyber nationalism is influenced by the state's upgraded cyber governance measures, the synergies between (sub)cultural groups' rituals and practices, and the burgeoning wanghong industry.

Cyber Governance

Apart from the institutional reform of establishing Cyber Administration of China (CAC) and curating a vibrant digital economy (Wang 2020; Sigley & Powell 2023), Chinese government has also paid great attention to governing online content in its cyber governance (Yang 2009; Tsai 2016; Han 2018). Various measures have been introduced to govern online content ranging from heavy-handed, draconian censorship to more subtle and sophisticated information management (Creemers 2015; Han 2018). Much has been written on the effectiveness and pervasiveness of China's online censorship (King et al., 2017; Ji & Bowersox 2021), though some have cautioned about its "porous" (Roberts 2018) and "fragmented" (Han 2018) nature, which renders far from omnipotent. Compared with the hardline control dimension, the softer, more subtle dimension of harnessing online contents aiming for a more favourable image to the public is often neglected (Sullivan et al., 2024). China disavows the proposition of the Internet democratization and technological determinism not only by virtue of its control capability, but also due to the pluralised nature of online expressions, which sustains authoritarian rule by mobilizing nationalist expressions to suppress liberal and dissenting voices (Han 2018: 15-16). Apart from censoring contents that have potential to trigger collective actions (King et al., 2013), the regulator often resorts to

the harness approach of amplifying pro-regime and nationalist messages (Mattingly & Yao 2022).

Under President Xi Jinping, various measures have been introduced to enhance and develop the harness dimension. Paid commentators and bots, dubbed as "fifty-cent army" (*wumaodang*, 五毛党), flood the cyber space with pro-regime or irrelevant information to distract the public attention away from sensitive issues (King et al., 2017). Learning this practice's ineffectiveness due to its awkward and unconvincing rhetorical style (Han 2015), the Party-state has given more emphasis to "online mass line approach" (*wangluo qunzhong Luxian*, 网络群众路线), an approach introduced by President Xi which urges cadres and official media to actively reach out to the netizens and involve more actors in the production of nationalist messages (Chen & Wang 2019). Some scholars also find that censorship is intentionally kept low on certain issues to allow the government to gauge public opinions (Qin et al., 2017), a practice known as "responsive authoritarianism" (Carnesecca 2015; Repnikova 2018). To win the heart and minds of the younger generations, the party-state has carefully "reinvented" official culture (Guo 2018) by absorbing more elements of youth and popular culture into its communication, such as experimenting with new forms of nationalist expressions from popular music to animation (Guo 2018; Zou 2019). (Para)State actors played an active role in major nationalistic episodes including the "Diba expedition" on Facebook in protest against Tsai Ing-wen's "Taiwan independence agenda" and the backlash against the actresses who support for "Taiwan independence" in Zhao Wei's film (Fang & Repnikova 2018; Shan & Chen 2021). Though political discussion is neither encouraged nor favoured on the Chinese Internet (Sullivan 2014; Sullivan & Wang 2024), nationalist narratives are an exception whose

circulation is not only tolerated but even promoted by the state as a means to rally public support for policy goals (Sullivan & Wang 2023). For example, Chinese regulators have a poor record in cracking down hate speeches wrapped under nationalist rhetoric (CGSC 2021; Wang & Burcu 2024), indicating the relative "freedom" enjoyed by nationalist narratives. In other words, it is no longer true that cyber nationalism equals popular nationalism due to the increasing inroads made by the Chinese state into the cybersphere.

Synergies between Digital (sub)Cultures and Nationalism

As discussed in the second wave of cyber nationalism, online (sub)cultural groups' have actively engaged in nationalism co/re-production and dissemination. Recent years have witnessed growing synergies between nationalism and popular/digital cultures, resulting in substantial changes in the expression of cyber nationalism brought by rituals and practices of different online groups. For example, China's (predominantly female) K-pop fandom has combined their idol worship practice with nationalist expressions, creating the coined phrase "*a-zhong gege*" (阿中哥哥, Brother China) to idolize the Chinese nation. Chinese K-pop fandom's involvement in cyber nationalism productions has challenged the male-dominated nationalist narratives (Zhuang et al., 2023). One of the most well-known examples is China's 2019 boycott against NBA when the manager of Huston Rocket Darley Murray issued a tweet supporting Hong Kong protestors. The male-dominated NBA fandom's reluctance to severe ties with NBA was repudiated by K-pop fandom girls as unpatriotic, who cited their leading role in boycotting their beloved K-pop idols during the THAAD episode (Wang 2022). Elsewhere, the supposedly cosmopolitan anime fandoms (due to their exposure to predominantly Japanese animation works) have also

voluntarily boycotted amines or influencers due to their “anti-China” stance. For example, the world’s largest virtual YouTuber company Hololive was forced to exit the Chinese market due to one of its livers’ referring to Taiwan as a “country” (Madjar 2020). The fan-operated agents for the company’s livers openly denounced the company and voluntarily renounced their cooperations with their idols.

The increasing synergies between online (sub)cultural groups and nationalism have also influenced the narrative style of cyber nationalism. Online buzzwords and catchphrases which previously belong exclusively to small groups are assuming greater visibility in nationalist narratives. Borrowing from Alexander Edelstein’s “uninym” (Edelstein 1997: 24), I consider such neologist practices have rendered the expressions of cyber nationalism less formal and more playful. For example, “our expedition goes beyond the stars and further than the sea”, a quotation from the nationalist anime *Year Hare Affairs*, become a famous catchphrase to express national proud in cyber nationalism narratives. On other occasions, such neologist practices are adopted in tit-for-tat trolling between netizens holding different political views. For example, netizens disapproving of (female) fan-turned nationalists tend to describe them as “little pink” (*xiaofenhong*, 小粉红), implying their naivety and irrationality (Fang & Repnikova 2018). Other examples include “white left” (*baizuo*, 白左) that denounces those having liberal thoughts (Zhang 2017), “Five hundred thousand” *(wushiwan*, 五十万) in reference to spies and saboteurs due to the prize offered by Chinese government in reporting them, and “Party of Anti-China” (*henguodang*, 恨国党) and “colonized people” (*zhiren*, 殖人) as a general reference to those issuing anti-regime narratives. The increasingly innovative and diversified online nationalist

expressions call for closer attention to both the textual and contextual level to unpack how nationalism permeates into popular culture, or vice versa.

Wanghong

Wanghong (网红) are people who achieve fame and visibility by engaging netizens. Though having parallels with "microcelebrity", a concept developed in the West, wanghong have its own distinctive features due to the peculiar political, technological and economic contexts of China (Zhang & de Seta 2018). The "state-capitalist power alliance" (Zhang 2020), resulted from the CPC's co-optation of major tech-giants, disciplines the cyberspace but also carefully curates the sustainability of digital economy (Lagerkvist 2011). Companies such as Tencent and Alibaba spearheaded the development of "wanghong economy" (*wanghong jingji*, 网红经济) by encouraging the commodification and profiteering activities of influencers as part of its E-commerce strategy (Han 2021; Carig et al., 2021). Apart from digital infrastructure and platform economy, the performativity dimension involving self-branding, identity construction and gendered practices is key to understand the activities of (Xu & Zhao 2019; Fu et al., 2024). As Abidin (2018: 3) notes, wanghong is different from "content creators" in the Anglocentric world in the sense that they are based "on the acute ability to covert the Internet viewer traffic to money, relying less on content production than the ability to hold an audience's attention visually". Audiences expect wanghong to be more authentic and accessible than traditional celebrities, and they invest both money and emotional labour to cultivate para-social or even "para-kin" relationships with wanghong (Yan & Yang 2021). Reflecting the "demotic turn" in China's celebrity industry (Turner 2006), the wanghong phenomenon has not only empowered

ordinary people in pursuit of fame and fortune, but also yielded tremendous economic gains from the burgeoning wanghong economy. The E-commerce ecosystem fostered by the "state-capitalist power giant" facilitates live commerce (*daihuo*, 带货), where wanghong sells and endorses products and services during livestreaming (Cunningham et al., 2019: 10).

Cyber nationalism and the wanghong phenomenon exert influences on each other. The increasing economic weight and social influence carried by wanghong have put them under tighter scrutiny not only from the state but also from cyber nationalists. The Chinese public expect wanghong to hold high moral standards reflecting "truth and beauty" (Sullivan & Kehoe 2019), embodying socialist core values and disseminating positive energies (Chen & Wang 2019). Numerous online celebrities have seen their careers doomed because of their unpatriotic behaviours. Cyber nationalism is not always in tension with the wanghong phenomenon though. Media entrepreneurship, one of the key forces driving the lucrative wanghong economy, encourages cyber nationalists to become opinion leaders and produce news stories and commentaries underpinned by a nationalistic tone (Zhang & Ma 2023: 902). Promoting and disseminating positive energy, a baseline set by the Party-state to regulate online content productions, provides the political correctness for the nationalist media entrepreneurship (Chen & Wang 2019). Just as some netizens sarcastically remarked that "patriotism has now turned into a business", the success of entrepreneurial cyber nationalists proves that the political discussions can indeed generate visibility and profits notwithstanding China's apolitical and strictly regulated cyberspace. Moreover, wanghong subculture has also brought forth the niche "political celebrities" in China, such as the infamous former "wolf warrior diplomat" Zhao Lijian (Sullivan

& Wang 2023), a scene difficult to imagine in the past given China's political culture that is averse to the celebritization of politics (Jeffery 2016).

Summary

The conceptualization of China's cyber nationalism in the context of this thesis is based on the following arguments summarized from previous literature. Firstly, the variety of actors involved in the co/reproduction of cyber nationalism suggests the need to go beyond the conventional "official vs. popular" paradigm in conceptualizing Chinese nationalism. The evolving socio-political situation of China means that neither the state nor the public can determine the formation and expression of cyber nationalism, as both are involved in its co/reproduction and dissemination. Instead of treating it as a form of popular nationalism, I conceptualize cyber nationalism as an ensemble of the narratives of official, intellectual and popular nationalism on the Internet. This definition has taken the fresh developments in China's information environment into consideration, including the state's upgraded cyber governance, the burgeoning media entrepreneurship, the rise of "media intellectuals" and wanghong. Thus, cyber nationalism is given the broad definition as: "Online nationalist narratives in relation to China that are co/reproduced and disseminated by different actors including officials, intellectuals, (micro)celebrities, influencers and ordinary citizens". Secondly, the rituals and practices of various forms of digital (sub)cultures bear crucial implications to the formation and expression of cyber nationalism. Recent scholarship has also acknowledged the intersection between online (sub)cultures and nationalist expressions. It is essential to recognize that cyber nationalism is more than nationalist narratives on the Internet, and that the Internet is more than a medium for the dissemination of nationalism. Therefore, I argue that a narrower definition of cyber

nationalism is also needed to highlight the peculiarity of the digital context, which is "Online nationalist narratives in relation to China expressed by different actors and mediated through the distinctive practices, rituals, languages and (sub)cultures of cyberspace".

It is important to clarify that though putting forward two sets of definitions, I do not consider either having greater explanatory power than the other. Nor do I restrict narratives of cyber nationalism to a "closed" community such as K-pop fandom, E-sports lovers and football fans (Sullivan et al., 2023; Wang 2019; for more discussions of fandom nationalism, see Liu 2018). Instead, I emphasize the fluidity of digital (sub)cultures, whose rituals and practices are transferable to and can be appropriated by different groups actors to construct new narratives. The narrow definition of cyber nationalism is nevertheless necessary because it highlights the distinctive features of cyber nationalism, whose narrative styles are drastically different from more conventional forms of nationalist expressions in China.

Chapter Three: Total Propaganda and the Case of China

Introduction

Chapter Two has demonstrated the importance of nationalism in Chinese politics. Premised on the significance of nationalism in the PRC's propaganda (Liu & Ma 2018; Mattingly & Yao 2020, 2022), I conceptualize propaganda as a vehicle for the co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalism messages. Critically engaging with previous literature and foregrounding a sociological perspective of propaganda, I construct my theoretical framework based on the theories of "total propaganda" put forward by Jacques Ellul and Alexander Edelstein (Ellul 1965; Edelstein 1997). Total propaganda goes beyond formal politics into cultural and social lives, which provides me with the premise to investigate the communication activities of nationalistic online key opinion leaders. Taking account into China's particular historical and political backgrounds, I make necessary adjustments to both thinkers' theories. While I agree with Ellul's definition of propaganda as "a set of methods", his denial of individuals' agency in the propaganda process (Ellul 1965: 61) is not in line with contemporary China's reality where the public are increasingly active in online self-expression. Edelstein's theory offers a complement to Ellul's theory, as he acknowledges individual agency in "new propaganda", which, different from "old propaganda", grows out of more "egalitarian and participant forces" and "sustains or enhances individual participation in popular culture" (Edelstein 1997: 4-5). His optimism of the liberating power of new propaganda, however, needs to be weighed against the fact that popular culture co-evolutes with authoritarianism in China (Jiang 2016). My conceptualization of new propaganda downplays the normative aspect of individual freedom but focuses on the synergies between propaganda and popular cultures. In

this thesis' context, I define propaganda as the process where groups of individuals adopt a set of methods to (co/re) produce and disseminate contents featuring nationalistic messages.

This chapter begins with an overview of propaganda literature. Tracing how different scholars have studied the phenomenon across time, I argue that propaganda studies have moved from a preoccupation with normative concerns towards an emphasis on problematizing and investigating the propagandistic nature of more diverse forms of communications. Then, I critically engage with Ellul and Edelstein's theories, identify their key contributions to this thesis's framework and make necessary adjustments to their original theoretical positions according to the specific Chinese context. Finally, I discuss implications of the Chinese Internet and the increasingly participatory nature of digital propaganda and how they contribute to my theoretical framework.

Propaganda Literature: An Overview

The word "propaganda" has a religious origin, which can be traced back to the 17th century when Roman Catholic Church wanted to reassert its spiritual authority to counter the influence from Protestantism. The original meanings of propaganda were "sending forth", "to propagate and to sow by means of spiritual arms, by prayers and good works, by preaching and catechising in order to diffuse the gospel" (Guilday 1921: 480). Though the Vatican saw this as a noble undertaking, propaganda gradually attained the negative connotation in the Protestant world, where it was seen as the coercive indoctrination of undesirable ideas (Bernays 2012: 9). In short, propaganda was born as a laudatory term, but gradually gained negative connotations as the activity drew increasing hostility from rivalry forces. As Edward Bernays, one of the

pioneers in propaganda studies remarked: Whatever our enemies said, we called it propaganda, and vice versa (Bernays 2012: 14).

The drastic changes in social structures and the advent of mass media in the late 19th century broke up traditional values and social organizations and led to surging scholarly interest in propaganda studies. Many scholars were particularly concerned with the newly emerged mass media as the external and social impacts on public opinions (see for example, Lippman 1925; Bauer & Bauer 1960). In adjacent disciplines, the exposure of men's subconsciousness by psychoanalysis constituted the internal and psychological conditions for scholarly interest in propaganda. Propaganda was seen by American psychologist Edward Bernays as an essential component for mass society and a "progressive wonderous force" that would improve social governance (Bernays 2012). The mainstream literature normally understood propaganda as the dissemination of information through words, signs and symbols with particular views to influence the public's beliefs or behaviours (Lasswell 1927; Bernays 2012).

The two World Wars and the subsequent Cold War saw the dramatic increase of propaganda conducted by different countries targeting both their domestic citizens for mobilization and their enemies as psychological warfare (Linebarger 1948). Based on his study of the US's Cold War Operations, Parry-Giles (2002: xxxvi) gave out the definition of war-time propaganda as "strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source". The Great wars and Cold War led to increased criticisms towards propaganda as ethically problematic. Though Lasswell (1995: 15) continued to justify propaganda as necessary and legitimate, there has been prevailing

antagonism towards propaganda since the early 20th century due to the atrocity associated with the propaganda of Nazi Germany, Bolshevik Russia and even some Western democracies (Jowett & O'Donnell 2019: 152). More importantly, the ideological rivalry between democracy, fascism and communism also contributed to hostility towards propaganda as each country was determined to label her messages as truth while those of opponents as propaganda.

The growing interest in propaganda studies brought forth more sophisticated conceptualization of this term. Leonnard Doob defined propaganda in 1948 as "the attempt to affect the personalities and to control the behaviour of individuals towards ends considered unscientific or of doubtful value in a society at a particular time" (Doob 1948: 2). Later in his life, he rejected a clear-cut definition of propaganda because he considered the changing social and cultural context added to its complexity (Doob 1989). Doob's socio-psychological approach was echoed by Pratkanis and Aronson (2001: 11), who defined propaganda as "mass 'suggestion' of influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology and the individual". Opposing to Doob's open-ended definition, however, Jowett and O'Donnell gave out arguably the most meticulous definitions of propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandists" (Jowett & O'Donnell 2019: 6). Sharing Jowett and O'Donnel's interest in the communicative dimension, Bogart (1995: 195-196) nevertheless gave a more positive account of propaganda as "an art requiring special talent" and a task requiring propagandists to have "good mind, genius, sensitivity and knowledge of how that audience thinks and reacts". Foregrounding an institutional perspective, Carey (1997: 20) defined propaganda as

"communications where the form and content is selected with the single-minded purpose of bringing some target audience to adopt attitudes and beliefs chosen in advance by the sponsors of the communications".

Most early scholarly efforts on the conceptualization of propaganda were preoccupied with a normative concern, which led some scholars to conceptualize "persuasion" as a form of ethical communication alternative to propaganda. Pratkanis and Turner (1996), for example, defined propaganda as "attempts to move a recipient to a predetermined point of view by using simple images and slogans that truncate through by playing on prejudices and emotions" (190). Persuasion, on the other hand, is based on "debate, discussion, and careful consideration of options" to discover "better solutions for complex problems" (191). Jowett and O'Donnel (2019) further elaborated upon the differences between propaganda and persuasion. Persuasion is an interactive and transactive process, with transparency in the source of information and the identity of persuader. Propaganda, on the other hand, is the self-interested attempt by the propagandist to manipulate the behaviour of others. As a result, persuasion may lead to a change of attitudes in its audience, but the result is of mutual benefits for both the audience and communicator. Propaganda, on the contrary, often has its information flow controlled by the propagandist, whose true identity and purposes are concealed. Moreover, it serves the interest of the propagandist often at the cost of that of audience.

Outside of propaganda studies, persuasion, both as a theory and a practice, also stimulates extensive discussions in communication studies (Dillard & Pfau 2002; Dillard & Shen 2012). Generally, persuasion consists of three different processes of shaping, reinforcing and/or changing audience's attitudes (Miller 1980, 2002). In relation to mass media theories, persuasion is examined through agenda setting

(McCombs & Shaw 1972), which focuses on the saliency of media contents, cultivation (Gerbner et al., 2002), which studies how the media manufacturers a symbolic world, and social learning (Bandura 1986), which explores how our socialization is influenced by the media. Persuasion practices are closely linked to politics, and political persuasion happens at different levels from a voter's appreciation of a piece of campaign commercial to the whole nation's reception of a presidential speech (Perloff 2012: 259-260). In particular, political persuasion is closely related to the concept of frame, which is a theme carefully harnessed by the communicator to underlie a controversial, multifaceted issue (Gamson 1989). Political communicators use different framings to influence audiences' interpretations of an event for their desired outcome.

The increasing influence of poststructuralism in the late 20th century brought new challenges to propaganda critics. Critically engaging with public relations literatures represented by James Grunig (Grunig 1989), poststructuralists called the symmetrical communication theory into question (Weaver, et. al 2006; Pieczka & L'Etang 2006). From poststructuralism's discourse-centred perspective, premised on the discourse's (re/de)construction of social reality (Parker 1991; Fairclough 1995), public relations practitioners are "discourse technologists" (Motion & Leith 1996) who strategically deploy texts in discursive struggles over given sociocultural practices. The aim of such discursive struggles is to maintain or transform these sociocultural practices, as well as the values and attitudes supporting them or embodied by them. Inspired by poststructuralists' critics on public relations theory, I argue that persuasion, or other forms of ethical communications proposed by propaganda critics are equally problematic when subject to the critical lens, since they are still discursive acts which

can change the values and attitudes represented by or supportive of certain sociocultural practices. Moreover, even when the political persuader observes the rule of honesty, openness, mutual benefits required by symmetrical communications, their capability to set the communication agenda and the inherent power dynamics between communicators and the audience cannot be neglected (Weaver et al., 2006: 19).

In short, I summarize two key takeaways from propaganda literature. Firstly, it is preferable to dispense the Manichean view in assuming the existence of an ethically acceptable form of a propaganda message. Rejecting a radical relativist perspective, I nevertheless argue that presuming a "whitelist" for certain forms of communication risks omitting their propagandistic potentials. For example, many literatures have noted the interplay between propaganda and artistic works (Leith 1964; Staal 2018, 2019), which were not necessarily created for propaganda purposes in the first place. In other words, it is necessary for us to critically consider the propagandistic nature of a particular medium. Secondly, while most scholars focus on the communicative and psychological aspects of propaganda (Bogart 1995; Pratkanis & Aronson 2001; Jowett & O'Donnel 2019), I propose that a socio-cultural perspective is equally important for a comprehensive understanding of propaganda. The merits of focusing on communicative and psychological aspects lies in unpacking how certain messages are propagated and what effects they have on the recipients. A socio-cultural perspective explores other dimensions of propaganda in terms of where it originates, how it is expressed and how different actors interact with each other in the propaganda process. To address these questions, this thesis pays particular attention to propaganda theories of Jacques Ellul and Alexander Edelstein, whose theories are premised on a socio-cultural perspective of propaganda.

Ellul's Total Propaganda

In one of his most significant works, *Propaganda, The Formation of Men's Attitude*, French sociologist Jacques Ellul defines propaganda as "a set of method employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization" (Ellul 1965: 61). One of the key differences between Ellul and previous propaganda scholars such as Bernays, Laswell and Lippmann, is that he does not consider propaganda is created by certain groups of people for a specific purpose. Instead, he takes a broader sociological view and put forward the concept of "total propaganda" (Ellul 1965:9). Total propaganda utilizes all types of media instruments, such as newspaper, radio broadcast, TV programs, billboards and movies, manifests through various forms of communication from parliamentary speeches and official notices to curriculums and café talks to reach the "whole man and all men" (11). It not only reaches people from all walks of life but also encircles an individual from all intellectual and psychological routes. In its most extreme case, total propaganda cannot be contradicted, discussed and reflected upon, aiming at achieving "quasi-unanimity" (11) and rendering all alternative discourses negligible, if not eliminated. The ultimate outcome of total propaganda is the take-over of literature and history by propaganda messages.

According to Ellul, both top-down political mobilization in authoritarian regimes and the consumerism-driven advertising in democracies are able to achieve the continuous effects of total propaganda (Ellul 1965: 232, 304). Continuous propaganda does not necessarily require all messages in the information environment to be homogenous. Under total propaganda, contradictory messages can only exert trivial effects on the

audience as they have become accustomed to the reality constructed by total propaganda. For example, during China's Great Leap Forward, official propaganda extolling the advent of the communist utopia, which was completely detached from the reality, was nevertheless able to convince the vast majority of the public (Shen & Xia 2011). Local cadres, intellectuals, workers and farmers who dared express concerns were condemned as "rightist", a class label indicating their political unreliability (Mao 2019). In the context of democracy, an example is the once prevailing subliminal advertising which embedded promotion messages into movies, commercials, music, and cartoons. Such messages can effectively change target audience's behaviours and beliefs by exerting influence on their subconsciousness via the hidden signals in the message, which is an ethically problematic practice (Bornstein 1989; Zekan & Zekan 2022).

Different forms of propaganda exist under total propaganda, which can operate either jointly or separately. Ellul classifies different them into four pairs, each consisting of two opposite types, whose operations involve various actors and mediums. Political propaganda is opposite to sociological propaganda, as the former is a deliberate and calculated human effort while the latter manifests as socio-cultural representations that carries value-ladened messages without being overtly propagandistic. Agitation propaganda (agitprop) is grouped with integration propaganda, as the former aims at instigating and challenging the existing order, encouraging people to take actions, while the latter is employed to stabilize and maintain the status quo, and render the audience into passivity (Ellul 1965: 71). Vertical propaganda differs from horizontal propaganda regarding their structure and organization principle (Ellul 1965: 80). Vertical Propaganda is a top-down model of communication that requires a powerful

leader top and a large mass media apparatus, with the aim of eliciting passive acceptance. Horizontal propaganda separates different social groups, firmly integrates group members into their own organization and severs the influences from one from the other (Ellul 1965: 83-84). It requires group members' active participation in the propaganda process. The last group of classification includes rational and irrational propaganda. Their difference is methodological rather ethical, as rational propaganda utilizes factual information and appeals to reason while irrational propaganda works on emotions. It is worthwhile to point out that a piece of factual information can still be propaganda depending how it is deployed by the propagandists or accepted by the audience. For example, an economic report with sophisticated statistics and analyses can function as rational propaganda. An ordinary citizen may not be able to grasp the meaning of these information but still believes it due to its appearing rationality, and as a result generates admiration for the nation's great development. The boundary between "information" and "propaganda" has been blurred in modern society (Ellul 1965: 84-85). It should be noted that different forms of propaganda work complimentarily rather than contradictorily in a society, and they are transformable depending on the change in social conditions. For example, sociological propaganda can transform into political propaganda by making its practices more deliberate and its political appeals more explicit. For example, movies and television programmes often contains tacit political messages which prepare the ground for more direct and acute political campaign (Zhang & Cameron 2004: 313). Likewise, political propaganda can gradually become more subtle and "acceptable" and transform into sociological propaganda. For example, the emphasis of propaganda work in the early years of the PRC regularly switched between the theme of revolution and economic development depending on the changing domestic and foreign situations. The theme

of nation-building and the construction of a "New China" was a thread uniting different types of propaganda under total propaganda. The next section shall apply Ellul's theories to China, discuss its theoretical implications and make necessary adjustments.

Total Propaganda in China: From Commune to the Internet

China is considered by Ellul as a typical case of total propaganda (Ellul 1965: 14, 71, 305-313). Comparing China to the Soviet Union, Ellul illustrates two different types of authoritarian propaganda. He characterizes China's total propaganda as "brainwashing" (Ellul 1965:311) under Mao Zedong, combining institutional arrangements, political campaigns and psychological manipulation, such as establishing People's Commune and promoting self-criticism. Wartime narratives were incorporated into the construction of a "new China", and the construction of socialism was often described as a war between different states (socialist states vs. capitalist states) and different classes (proletariats vs. capitalists) (Meisner 1999: 90). Moreover, mass campaigns were frequently waged to illicit political participations, such as the mobilization for Korean War, collectivization and anti-corruption. In the PRC's early years, propaganda work relied more on grassroots party organizations, such as communes and party branches within working units, in the absence of an advanced mass media network. Therefore, China's propaganda under Mao was political, agitational and horizontal in nature, because it was foregrounded on a supreme leader, put the public in constant belligerence and relied on the "small group" tactics. Finally, propaganda under Mao tended to appeal to emotions instead of rationality. For example, propaganda messages during Great Leap Forward were filled with ludicrous information about agricultural and industrial yields and unrealistic

slogans such as “surpass Britain and catch up with America” (*chaoying ganmei*, 超英赶美) (Chan 2001). The frenzy personality cult of Mao was also an example of such irrational propaganda, when cadres’ promotion and demotion were based on their loyalty to the Chairman rather than their administration competitiveness (Leese 2011). To sum up, according to Ellul, China’s total propaganda under Mao Zedong relied heavily on manpower instead of technology in disseminating propaganda messages (horizontal), emphasized the status of the supreme leader and the importance of political line (*zhengzhi luxian*, 政治路线) (political), appealed to emotions (irrational) and favoured mass movements and political campaigns (agitational).

The emergence of Deng Xiaoping as Mao’s successor marks a turn in Chinese propaganda towards a more sociological, rational and integrational style. “Class struggle” was replaced by “economic development and modernization” as the central task for the Party. “Cult of personality” was formally denounced, and the priority was given to construct “collective leadership” (Tsang 2014). The Party was determined to avoid repeating the disastrous power struggle and policy mistakes in Mao’s era and established performance-based legitimacy premised on delivering material benefits to the public (Yang & Zhao 2015). Emotional work, the corner stone for irrational propaganda, still had a role to play in propaganda work, but more rational elements were brought into propaganda work echoing with Deng’s call for “seeking truth from facts” (*shishi qiushi*, 实事求是).

Moreover, thanks to its economic take-off, China started to establish its own system of vertical propaganda from the 1980s, when the country made substantial progress in developing its mass media infrastructure, such as building a nation-wide broadcasting

network China Central Television (CCTV) (Zhang 2011). From newspaper to television, the Party effectively maintained its control over media industry through a combination of censorship and sponsorship (Tai 2014; Hassid 2020). Financially, though media groups were allowed to attract private and foreign investments, the Party must retain control of no less than 50% of ownership (Zhang 2011: 54-55). Moreover, regulators started to restrict the number of licences granted to commercial outlets from mid-1990s and encouraged media conglomeration by placing different provincial-level media groups under the Party's leadership (Zhang 2011: 48). Major news outlets were subject to stringent editorial checks and ideological education, where news workers would receive specific guidelines from above regarding how to report sensitive issues, ensuring the "*tifa*" (提法， wording) was consistent across different outlets (Qian 2012). In some extreme cases, the Party would directly intervene to censor reports it considered problematic. The party's control over media industry has reached a new height with current leader Xi Jinping's blunt words that "Media must be named after the Party" (媒体姓党，*meiti xingdang*) (Xinhua 2016). Subject to both political and financial pressures, the partially commercialized media industry in China not only failed to challenge the regime but helped to consolidate its vertical propaganda (Zhang 2011: 50). The classic work *Four Theories of the Press*, for example, expect the media either to advocate personal freedom (libertarian theory) or serving the common good, educating the public and acting as the watchdog (social responsibility theory). The case of China, in contrary, shows closer resemblance to the authoritarian and the communist theory, which deny individual rationality and claim that the media should serve the ruling elites' interest (Siebert et al., 1963).

The recent developments in the Internet infrastructure and the popularization of social media has further problematized other aspects of Ellul's theories. To begin with, China's total propaganda in its cybersphere is not only about state's coercive power and direct intervention, but also about creating an unbalanced discursive field where certain opinions are more easily transmitted than others. The issue of censorship is arguably the most salient topic among scholars' discussion of the intersection between Chinese politics and the Internet (King, et.al 2013; Xu & Albert 2014). This leads to an impression that the Chinese party-state relies solely on coercive power to police the cybersphere due to its destabilizing potential by harbouring alternative narratives to the official propaganda which are capable of instigating collective actions (Wacker 2003; Hess 2013). However, such arguments only tell part of the story. The effectiveness of China's cyber propaganda does not originate solely from coercion and restrictive control of information flows. Empirical research has found out that censorship often allows criticisms towards the government but prioritizes on cracking down call for collective actions, such as demonstrations and petitions (King et al., 2013). Chinese regulators even conditionally tolerate investigative media and social media users' exposure of low-level, local malfeasance (Lorentzen 2013). Roberts (2018) builds her theory of censorship based on the case of the Chinese Internet and rightly remarks that apart from the fear/coercion mechanism, friction and flooding play no less significant role in Chinese government's regulation of the Internet. Relying on the spectacle effects of publicly punishing people for posting problematic contents or accessing prohibitive information, the fear mechanism might not be as effective in the social media era as in the mass media era, because the cost of punishing every offence is too high. Therefore, the logic of regulating the Internet moves from

completely restricting access to towards increasing the cost for people to access such information, by imposing an "information tax" on people.

Apart from the misunderstanding of how censorship works on the Chinese Internet, a common misjudgement is derived from the "Internet democratization" theory (Dahlgren 2000) which pre-supposes the inherently democratizing potential of the Internet. Such perspective is influenced by technological determinism, a theoretical position granting technology its own logic and power in shaping social progress (Winner 1978). This position has since been subjected to intense scholarly debate between hard technological determinism (Smith & Marx 1994) and social constructivism, which highlights historical and social conditions' influence upon the interpretations and purposes of technology (Hackett et al., 2008). Not intending to join such debates, I concur with Dafoe's (2015) middle-way argument which specifies the extent, in what ways and under what conditions do socio-historical context influences technology, and vice versa. Scholars have argued that country-specific conditions need to be taken into consideration before judging the Internet's democratizing potential (Hill & Hughes 1999; Leslie 2002). The case of China challenged the Internet democratization theory by demonstrating that an authoritarian regime can effectively adapt to and take advantage of it to enhance its rule (Schneider 2014; Sullivan 2014). Robert's "flooding" mechanism explains the Party-state's adaptation to and appropriation of the Internet. Since the beginning of Xi's presidency, the Chinese government has placed fresh emphasis on controlling online narratives (Creemers 2017). Apart from placing tightened control on online public discussions, the government has invested more resources in building up its online propaganda capacity. Government organs and official media have boosted their social media presence,

"revolutionizing" their news narratives and provide more appealing contents to adapt to the cyber discursive field (Repnikova & Fang 2019). Technology firms also play their own part in information management by manipulating the algorithms and recommendation mechanisms of the platforms (Bolsover & Howard 2019). More strikingly, the Party-state is bold to experiment with promoting a "political celebrity" persona, arguably embodied by President Xi himself (Yin & Flew 2018) and cultivating more pro-regime voices on the grassroots (Neagli 2021). These developments result in a new model of total propaganda which, instead of promising totalized control of information dissemination, creates a totalized information environment favouring the (co/re)production of specific propaganda messages.

Whether people are prompted to take political actions is a key standard for Ellul to characterize political/agitational propaganda. However, the Chinese government has managed to confine most political expressions within the virtual sphere without letting them spiral into the physical world. The Party-state's tame of cyber nationalism is one example. Though official propaganda promotes nationalism to boost regime legitimacy, radical nationalists pose a challenge to social stability when they took to the street as in the early 2000s' anti-Japanese protest (Wallace & Weiss 2015). As discussed in Chapter Two, the state's cyber governance measures have managed to prevent cyber nationalism from escalating into street protests. The government feels much more comfortable with the "online crusades" conducted by the new generation of cyber nationalists, whose seldom hold rallies and demonstrations to disturb social stability (Yang 2018). Digital activism blurs the distinction between political/sociological and agitational/integrational propaganda, as the political messages are often communicated in a playful manner (Chen, et.al 2021). As much as

the Internet can amplify certain messages, it can equally trivialize them. Instead of protesting on the streets, the new generation of Chinese nationalists, hoping not to directly confront the police force, opt for different strategies such as establishing websites to produce counter-narratives to the West's criticism of China, or organizing online collective actions targeting "hostile forces" toward China (Jiang 2012). The Chinese government has also become more sophisticated in managing nationalist sentiments through online propaganda. When the harsh criticisms of China's enemies turn into playful rituals, a layer of mundanity is added to the "political/agitational" propaganda messages. This parallels "banal nationalism" (Billing 1995), which refers to how established nation states draw on existing ideological structures to reproduce nationhood on a daily basis. In short, China's digital context trivializes the public's political expressions. Moreover, cyber nationalists' lack of interest in taking political actions offline require us to rethink the "action" dimension of political/agitation propaganda.

Despite the challenges posed by China's peculiar conditions, Ellul's theory remains crucial for this thesis's framework. To begin with, his sociological perspective of propaganda is suitable for the online setting, where propaganda messages come in different forms, most of which are subtle and hard to recognize. It requires the researcher to broaden the scope of enquiry and look beyond formal political actors, such as the accounts of government agencies or official media. Moreover, the Ellulian total propaganda goes beyond the formal political realm into the cultural realm and permeates into people's everyday life. As mentioned above, the mundanity and triviality of online political expressions indicate that they might take place in a less discernible corner of the Internet, yet their significance should not be underestimated

as part of total propaganda. Furthermore, Ellul's theorization about the dialectic relationship between mass and individual (Ellul 1965: 6-8) mirrors the condition of netizens who seek a sense of belonging in virtual "communities" but simultaneously question the authenticity of such bonds (Gilpin, et.al 2010). Facing such dilemma, individuals are easily subject to propaganda messages which they identify with. Therefore, a key point derived from Ellul's "alone in the mass" argument is that netizens are inevitably exposed to all kinds of propaganda messages and part of the propaganda process, either as a consumer, disseminators or co/re-producers of propaganda messages. However, this assumption also problematizes Ellul's theoretical position of denying personal agency, as the digital environment enables ordinary netizens to be active producers of propaganda messages by reposting, commenting, telling their own stories or even ridiculing the official narratives (Jones et al., 2017). To capture these activities, I introduce Alexander Edelstein's theory to bridge the gap and complement the framework, which will be discussed in the next section.

Edelstein's Total Propaganda

In *Total Propaganda: From Mass Culture to Popular Culture*, Alexander Edelstein introduces his socio-cultural approach to propaganda and explores how total propaganda is formed and operates under various forms of popular culture. Empirically, total propaganda "represents the totality of the old and the new propagandas, plus the energies they generate by their synergies and interaction" (Edelstein 1997: 9). For example, both environmental activists' grassroots campaigns for banning fossil fuels and corporate lobby groups' public relation efforts downplaying such concerns are propaganda. The former is considered as new

propaganda and the latter as old propaganda. The two different types of propaganda will compete and as a result generate more propaganda messages. Objectively, total propaganda includes all narratives around a particular issue. Subjectively, it indicates the degree of "propaganda warming" of popular culture (Edelstein 1997: 9). By propaganda warming, Edelstein refers to the degree of the synergies between popular culture and propaganda. According to Edelstein, the integration of propaganda and popular culture is as a positive trend as it encourages self-expression and signals the shift from monolithic, authoritarian culture to plural, democratic culture (Edelstein 1997: 16-17).

Total propaganda consists of both old and new propaganda. The fundamental difference between the two is the cultural context where they originate and operate. Old propaganda originates from mass culture, and new propaganda from popular culture. Edelstein (1997: 5) identifies a paradigm shift from mass culture to popular culture since the late 20th Century. Mass culture refers to the public's reception of various cultural products, incorporating mass media, advertising industry, entertainment, and public opinions upon certain aspects of ongoing political trends (Brantlinger 2016). Under the mass culture paradigm, the public's access to popular culture is severely curtailed and restricted by political forces. The shift from mass culture towards popular culture grants the public a more active membership in socio-cultural life (Edelstein 1997: 8). The new paradigm of popular culture encourages more vibrant public participation in social, cultural, and political realms.

Edelstein's socio-cultural perspective also corresponds the development of propaganda literatures. The modern origin of old propaganda lies in politicians' control and manipulation of mass cultures throughout the 20th century, epitomized in

Lippmann (1925) and Bernays's (2012) writings about the necessity to manipulate public opinions and reaching its climax during the two World Wars and Cold War. Old propaganda, under the mass culture paradigm, presumes the existence of a charismatic, omnipotent leader who directs propaganda messages via mass media to the public. Operating upon a "sender-receiver" communication model (Larson 1988), old propaganda treats the public as the passive receivers of propaganda messages. New propaganda, on the other hand, is born from the egalitarian and participant popular culture, gradually prospering in the late 20th century. New propaganda operates on a communication model different from the centralized model of old propaganda. In the decentred model of new propaganda, each individual is an equal participatory force, who can produce their own messages, advocate their own courses, and debate with rivalry opinions. In short, participatory and active membership in cultural and political life is considered as the most typical feature of new propaganda (Edelstein 1997: 5), despite the imperfect nature of "equal" participation in most societies. Edelstein concludes that "If the rhetoric or actions limit the functioning of individuals in the popular culture, it is an old propaganda; If the rhetoric sustains or enhances participation in the popular culture, it is a new propaganda." (Edelstein 1997: 4-5). Citizens participate in the process of new propaganda via various mediums of popular culture including music, writing and painting. For example, the burgeoning rock music in the 1960s-1970s United States is a good example of new propaganda advocating peace movement and social justice (Rabaka 2013). New propaganda can thrive under different socio-cultural contexts, as Japan experienced similar civil movements during the same historical period, fuelled by opposition to US-Japan Anpo Treaty (Kapur 2018).

The emerging new propaganda as a social phenomenon also informs propaganda studies to extend the research scope beyond political events into the field of popular culture. Throughout the 20th century, most propaganda studies focus overwhelmingly either on political actors such as states, organizations, professional propagandists or political events with direct political consequences, such as wars and political campaigns. A line was drawn between political and apolitical forms of communications, such as public relations and persuasion (Jowett & O'Donnell 2019: 21). Such tendencies exclude new propaganda outside the scope of propaganda inquiry (Edelstein 1997: 8). As more citizens assuming an active membership in society by performing their participatory functions, propaganda is no longer a task solely operated by "formal" political actors. The increasing interlinks between popular culture and politics also renders the assumed clear-cut boundary between "political" and "apolitical", "propaganda" and "non-propaganda" seems problematic. Though identifying the "paradigm shift" from mass culture to popular culture, Edelstein by no means suggests a replacement of old propaganda by new propaganda. Representing different modes of political communications, various forms of old and new propaganda coexist in the information environment and constitute total propaganda.

Applying Edelstein to Digital China

Three challenges exist when applying Edelstein's theory to the context of digital China. Firstly, Edelstein is overly optimistic about the positive impacts of the Internet in facilitating new propaganda. Secondly, Edelstein's own value predisposition favouring new propaganda as a progressive force restricts the concept's explanatory power in the case of China. Thirdly, the context of the Chinese Internet in the 2020s is fundamentally different from that of the 1990s US society upon which Edelstein

develops his theory. Despite all these challenges, Edelstein's theory still constitutes a crucial part for this thesis's theoretical framework. I adjust Edelstein's theory to suit my research purpose by discarding his value predisposition, reconceptualizing the difference between old and new propaganda, highlighting not only the confrontations but also the synergies between them.

Writing at the end of the 20th Century, Edelstein (1997: 43) shrewdly predicts that "cyberprop" (cyber propaganda) would become a dominant form of total propaganda in the future. To begin with, the development of the Internet and ICTs would make communication functions more accessible to the public, extending the base for the development of popular culture. Moreover, tech giants would have to keep redefining and innovating their infrastructures to stay competitive in the global technological system, bringing in more creativity into the sector. As a result, consumers would have more choices among different technologies, pathways and destinations. The consumption of cyberprop would become "as much of a self-identity as in exchanging information about one's ownership and use of technology" (Edelstein 1997: 45). As the more communication means are created, the more appetites people would have for new ones, constituting a virtuous circle.

More than two decades after Edelstein's writing, more negatives of ICTs are being exposed, leading to more criticisms towards the technology euphoria represented by Edelstein. To begin with, regarding the Internet as the unquestionably most universal, widely accessible and most representative media channel is misleading. Such opinions falsely homogenize the residents in rural and urban areas, and the people in Global North and Global South (MacDonald 2016: 30). The penetration rate of the Internet and ICTs remains imbalanced between different age groups and countries. Neglecting

these factors risks making generalizations based on the conditions of urban and younger populations in developed countries. Moreover, though major tech companies have made significant contributions to the popularization of the Internet and ICTs, the market and society do not necessarily shape their operations (Schneider 2023). Tech companies could stifle creativity in the industry by leveraging their economic strengths to marginalize start-ups, which often happens within Silicon Valley (Kirkwood 2021). In the case of China, the Party-state actively sponsors and subsidizes domestic tech companies while denying foreign companies a levelling playfield (Lim et al., 2018).

The monopoly of big corporations also calls into question of the authenticity of online identities, whose formation is subject to the manipulation of algorithms. It is increasingly difficult for one to ascertain whether all the searches and recommendations are based on one's true or "fed" interests due to the untransparent platform recommendation mechanism. Moreover, it has been widely acknowledged that state actors readily adopt the Internet and ICTs for both domestic and foreign propaganda purposes (Creemers 2017; Mare et al., 2019). In other words, the Internet is far from a utopia can become a means for the state's repression of civil society via surveillance, censorship and propaganda. Last but not least, technological innovations also have its dark side, as the above-mentioned algorithms manipulation, monopoly and more importantly, the potential for digital authoritarianism premised on the state's enhanced digital surveillance capability (Dragu & Lupu 2021). The Internet has not only encouraged the flourishing popular culture, but also ethically problematic practices including illegal pornography, hate speech, abuses and addiction (Khan 2000; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). To sum up, Edelstein's view on the cyber space and

cyberprop is too idealistic as it is based on the development of the Internet and ICTs in their early stage. This again reminds us that the emergence of new propaganda by no means indicates the withering away of old propaganda, and technology alone does not determine the nature of propaganda.

Edelstein's theoretical deficiencies lie both in his miscalculations of the Internet itself and his detachment from the specific context of China. I argue that the peculiarity of the Chinese Internet renders Edelstein's endorsement of new propaganda as a progressive force problematic. Though he has cleared the negative connotations associated with the term "propaganda", his value predisposition sneaks in through the back door of the distinction between "old vs. new" propaganda. New propaganda is seen as the public's voluntary expressions carrying positive values, while old propaganda retains the negative traits conceived by propaganda critics preoccupied with normative concerns. However, it is worthwhile to point out that Edelstein's "de-stigmatization" of a certain type of political communication differs from the previous scholarships, most notably represented by Jowett and O'Donnel (2019) and Grunig (1989). Instead of focusing on the issue of "how" to render a communication ethically approval, Edelstein instead stresses that it is "who" are conducting these communications that truly matters. Therefore, his theory avoids the critiques raised by L'Etang (2006b), who critiqued both Jowett and Grunig's theory on the ground that either organizational or state interest could override public interest, and ethical communication does not guarantee to speak for the society's common good (Weaver, et.al 2006).

The real issue with Edelstein's theory, however, is that he presupposes the existence of an independent civil society in all regimes, which is capable of making rational

decisions all the time. Even within the context of liberal democracy, the view of the Internet as a rational "public sphere" is contended by many scholars (Tong 2015; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015). Scholars have casted doubts on social media's potential of facilitating rather than obfuscating democratic processes, continuing the scholarship of Chomsky and Herman in the 20th century who raised similar doubts about mass media (Herman & Chomsky 1988). For example, Schulz and Roessler (2012) argues that the "free Internet" can as much stimulate debates as they can suppress discussions and trivialize crucial issues. When it comes to an authoritarian regime as China, the ruling CPC has long been aware of the destabilizing potential of the Internet and by spreading alternative narratives or mobilizing collective collections. The Chinese Internet is one of the most heavily censored in the world (Roberts 2018). The censorship regime established by the Party-state is notoriously effective through a combination of technological and administrative interventions (Xu & Albert 2014). Access to most foreign websites is blocked by the Great Fire Wall (GFW). Organizing collective actions through the Internet is virtually impossible because the censors are mostly sensitive towards such appeals (King, et.al 2017). The punishments for people voicing dissents online and engaging with online activism have become harsher under President Xi Jinping (Creemers 2017). As a result, China's online public sphere is at best scattered and severely curtailed under the Party-state's draconian regulations.

Yet, scholars such as Zhang (2011) have also pointed out the Internet's importance as the only possible venue for the public to seek and express alternative narratives to the state propaganda. Genuine, though limited, forms of digital activism are possible in China (Cao et al., 2022), provided they do not directly challenge the legitimacy of the

regime (King et al., 2013). In other words, the Internet does encourage Chinese public's self-expression and challenges the uniformed discursive environment manufactured by the state propaganda machine. However, one must not exaggerate the Internet's empowering of the Chinese civil society due to its encouragement of individual expressions. As Sullivan (2014) has observed, most information circulating on Sina Weibo, China's most popular social media platforms, does not entail serious political debates. Literature on China's cyber nationalism suggest that growing number of Chinese netizens are taking advantage of the Internet to disseminate their nationalistic sentiments as a substitution for the costly street protests, and this trend has been particularly visible among the post 1990s younger generations (Jiang 2012: 12). Different from the government sponsored "fifty-cent army" (*wumaodang*, 五毛党) (Han 2015), the new generation of cyber nationalists act voluntarily (Schneider 2018), express via different medium such as music, images, and games (Sullivan & Wang 2023), and displays diversified attitudes towards different issues (Zhang et al., 2018).

It is premature though to equal these new developments to Edelstein's conception of new propaganda. To begin with, most cyber nationalists show little interest in liberal and democratic ideas. In fact, as Jiang (2012) points out, cyber nationalists within the China's Generation Y cohort display loath towards the Western liberal democratic ideas. Moreover, China's nationalist propaganda and grassroots nationalist narratives often feature hatred and irrationality, corresponding to Edelstein's characterization of old rather than new propaganda. An "us vs. them" dichotomy is often invoked by nationalist propaganda, conveying strong xenophobic messages. Ironically, many of such activities does facilitate individuals' participation in popular culture, a key trait

of new propaganda considered by Edelstein. It suggests that nationalist expressions have become an indispensable part of China's popular culture. Jiang (2012: 28) argues that this is the result of the party-state's intentional promotion of "consumerism-driven patriotism", which encourages the popularized and commercialized expression of nationalist feelings. Movies promoting nationalism are regular blockbusters in China, from the *Wolf Warrior* (*zhanlang*, 战狼) series based on imagined storyline and Hollywood-styled hero, towards *Changjin Lake* (*changjinhu*, 长津湖) based on historical event. Nationalism propaganda has also appeared in more diversified forms to appeal to the younger generation. The popular anime series *Year Hare Affairs* (*nanian natu nashi*, 那年那兔那事), using animal figures to symbolize different countries, has attracted a huge fan base. In short, what we are witnessing now in the Chinese cybersphere is the pervasive grassroot nationalist propaganda, inspired by and simultaneously re-feeding the nationalist popular culture. However, such voluntary expressions do not entail advocates for democracy or freedom, and some of them amplify official narratives.

The Digital Context and Participatory Propaganda

The challenges Edelstein's theory discussed in the previous section require us to reconceptualize the distinction between old and new propaganda in the Chinese context. Unlike democracies, the authoritarian China does not allow the public expression of pluralistic political views. Under such conditions, it is unlikely that the integration of popular culture and propaganda can promote liberal ideas. What remains valid in the case of China, however, is the participatory nature of new propaganda that gives the public to a more active role in the propaganda process. To highlight this point,

I further introduce the model of "participatory propaganda" put forward by Wanless and Berk (2019: 86) to elaborate on my theoretical framework. Participatory propaganda is conducted through "the systemic integration of various techniques afforded by ICT advancements, harvesting of user profiles and savvy use of behavioural sciences". Propagandists not only directly engaged the targeted audience but also take advantage of the audience's social networks to amplify the propaganda effects. Regardless of the intention of the initiator of propaganda, the propagated messages see their meanings multiplied and their expressions diversified through the dissemination and co/reproduction process by the broader online audience. Individual netizens are difficult to recognize propaganda messages under the influence of "the combined application of various ICTs and behavioural analysis to segment, obfuscate and amplify persuasive messaging" (Wanless & Berk 2019: 92). Under the model of participatory propaganda, the difficulty to distinguish propaganda from non-propaganda is less a result of top-down pressure to suppress public expressions, but more of the surplus of meanings resulted from multiplied public expressions. Structurally, participatory propaganda moves beyond the unidirectional "one-to-many" mode of communication to the "one-to-many-to-many more" mode under which each receiver of propaganda messages can act as the initiator of a new round of dissemination and co/reproduction process.

Participatory propaganda involves three processes. It begins with segmentation, where the "first" propagandists identify, infiltrate or create online communities that aggregate around a particular interest. This is to create an online echo chamber that satisfy its members' pre-existing views. In the case of the Chinese Internet, this process is premised on the state's draconian online censorship with the cooperation of

tech companies, platform and forum regulators that severely curtails the expressions of anti-regime and liberal opinions the consumption of alternative narratives (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015). In more inch discussion groups and decentred online communities, individual netizens can still play an unneglectable role in influencing the discussions (Fang 2018). The big picture of China's online discursive sphere is dominated by apolitical contents, with the exception of nationalist narratives which enjoy greater freedom than other political expressions. Then comes the amplification process, where propaganda messages are increased to create an information environment in support of particular issues. As commented by Wanless and Berk, "the engagement of average users in heavy automation of supportive posts on social media…enables or at least contributes to, a more organic amplification effect" (2019: 90). To this purpose, the Chinese government has flooded the Internet with pro-regime voices as well as spam information to divert public attentions from critical issue (King et al., 2017). Amplification is followed by obfuscation, which refers to the conceal of the original source of propagandized contents, because people are less suspicious towards information from their close contacts (Wanless & Berk 2019: 90). Although the use of bots can generate greater volumes of information and wider reach, authentic audience engagement and persuasive contents result in more effective participatory propaganda, because they work on the cognitive bias of "social proof", whereby people mimic the behaviour of those like them (Amblee & Bui 2011). Realizing the limitations of its bot-facilitated pro-regime commentators, Chinese government has since emphasized "online mass line approach" (*wangluo qunzhong Luxian*, 网络群众路线) to actively reach out to the citizens via grassroots Party and government organizations (Chen & Wang 2019). Semi-official actors are also widely deployed,

who pose as independent, non-official information sources, whose messages win greater public trust (Huang et al., 2018; Neagli 2021).

Participatory propaganda offers us a useful framework for conceptualizing Edelstein's cyberprop as a process of segmentation, amplification and obfuscation. Crucially, I argue that it is more beneficial to conceptualize propaganda as a process rather than a single act or technique in the online setting. Focusing on the message itself without examining the cycle of its re/co-production, dissemination and the responses it elicits from the audience is not conducive to a comprehensive understanding of cyberprop. The model of "authoritarian participatory propaganda 2.0" (APA 2.0) put forward by Repnikova and Fang (2018) further develops Wanless and Berk's original model by putting it into an authoritarian information context represented by the Chinese cybersphere. Specifically, the APA 2.0 model incorporates a crucial dynamic of the co/re-production of propaganda by non-state actors, which is nevertheless overseen and manipulated by the Party-state through a series of initiatives including the increase of official actors' online presence and the promotion of patriotic bloggers. APA 2.0 also differs from the conventional mass participation in propaganda under dictators such as Hitler and Mao, because the Internet breaks down the "top-down" transmission of information and allows more "bottom-up" content productions. This new participatory mechanism enabled by digital media has both extended the reach of official propaganda as well as opened spaces for the productions of alternative narratives.

Non-state Actors' Participation in Digital Propaganda

Apart from state actors whose activities have already received extensive discussions (Qiang 2011; Wang 2020; Lu et al., 2023), non-state actors are attracting more scholarly attention for their role in China's digital propaganda, who are conceptualized either as astroturf or opinion leaders. Originally a concept from the US, astroturfing is a political communication tactic that manufactures fake public support during political campaigns (Lits 2020). Digital astroturfing refers to semi-official accounts posing as independent information sources airing pro-regime propaganda on social media as "astroturf influencers" (Kovic et al., 2018). Neagil (2021: 185), for example, focuses on the posting activities of China's semi-official accounts who intentionally differentiate themselves from their affiliated official organs. The second approach invokes the theory of key opinion leader, assumes that some individuals, known as "patriotic bloggers", operate independently from the state and are able to influence public opinions (Huang, et.al 2018). However, the independence of patriotic bloggers is put into serious doubts by some scholars due to the tight regulation imposed by Chinese regulators (Tsai 2016). Jointly considering the contributions of the two approaches, I argue that the astroturfing approach reveals the connection between different level of actors in the propaganda process. However, it overlooks the personalized character of propagandists, which is not necessarily possessed by all semi-official accounts. Propaganda literatures have long noted the importance of personal appeals in influencing the audience (Shabo 2008; Kim & Haley 2018). In China, such personal appeals manifest as *mingsheng* (fame 名声) and *renwang* (personal prestige 人望), which play a key role in both political communication and social life (Farh & Cheng 2000).

A more focused discussions which conceptualize key opinion leader as popular propagandists will be made in the next chapter' to operationalize my theoretical framework. Here, I shall focus on the personalized aspect shared by propagandists and opinion leaders as political communicators by reviewing two related theoretical positions: the public intellectual and the (Internet) celebrity. The public intellectual theory proclaimed by Jürgen Habermas (2006) portrays the objective, scientific and rationale actors who will educate the public about the correct values. Acting as political communicators, public intellectuals are expected to serve the public interest and engage in transparent conversations with the public. However, Habermas's original propositions of the "objectivity" of intellectuals are subject to increasing criticisms, as many scholars question whether it can be maintained under the influence of self-interest and political power (Swartz 2003; L'Etang 2006a; Baert & Booth 2012). Jacques Ellul argues that intellectuals are historically the most susceptible groups to propaganda, precisely due to their self-consciousness about their objectivity as intellectuals (Ellul 1965: 215). Their pursuit for rationality and objectivity renders them vulnerable to rational propaganda.

Celebrity theory offers an alternative approach to understand the personalized character of political communicator. Instead of having professional knowledge or skills, celebrities differ from intellectuals as they are famous for just being famous (Turner 2013). Though China's political culture rejects political celebrity, celebrity theory offers a useful theoretical lens to analyse certain public figures. Drawing on Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Strafella and Berg analyse the intersection of celebrity and social critic of the famous Chinese blogger Han Han (Strafella & Berg 2015), whose insinuated criticism on social reality treads a safe path and won him

public applause. It remains to see how nationalistic online opinion leaders acting as popular propagandists shed new lights on our understanding of intellectuals and the Internet celebrity.

Summary

This chapter lays out the theoretical framework for my thesis based on a critical engagement with theories of propaganda. An overview on propaganda literatures identifies a critical turn where more studies reject the dichotomy between "propaganda" and "information" which preclude certain forms of communication as non-propaganda. Total propaganda, a key theoretical contribution by Ellul and Edelstein premised on a sociocultural perspective, form the basis of my framework. Both conceptualizing propaganda as a sociological phenomenon, the two thinkers' theories are compatible in the same framework and suitable for my research interest in the cultural and sociological aspect of propaganda. The propagation of cyber nationalism in China involves a wide range of actors other than official propagandists. It has also gone beyond the realm of formal politics and made increasing inroads into various (sub)cultural communities. Thus, an enquiry based on the theory of total propaganda can achieve a comprehensive understanding of what are messages being propagated and how. The context of China, however, adds to the complexities to their original theoretical positions. I argue that it is necessary to recognize the public's participation in digital propaganda, albeit in an information environment tightly supervised by the state.

Non-state actors' activities are an important component of China's participatory propaganda. Different from previous research, I highlight the role played by

personalized accounts in the propagation of cyber nationalism. To this purpose, I foreground the communication activities of nationalistic online key opinion leader acting in the capacity as popular propagandists, a point I shall further discuss in the following chapter. Both public intellectual and celebrity theories facilitate my conceptualization of popular propagandists, highlighting the influence on public opinions and the performative dimensions of their propaganda activities. In relation to my thesis's the overarching question research, I consider the following sub-questions regarding popular propagandists are worth exploring: What propaganda messages do they produce and how? What are the political ideas reflected from their messages? Do they show similarities or differences from each other in terms of narrative styles and perspectives? Are they the mouthpiece of the state or the representative of public opinions? These questions are to be explored through the empirical analysis.

Chapter Four: Methodology and Research Design

Introduction

This chapter introduces the methodology and research design of this thesis. It begins with bridging my proposed concept of "popular propagandists" with the empirical research object. Built on the theory of key opinion leader (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968), I demonstrate how the communication activities of nationalistic online key opinion leaders on Weibo, the most popular social media platform in China, fits into my theoretical framework premised on the "totality" of propaganda and the complexity of actors involved in the propaganda process. Moreover, online key opinion leaders, by virtue of their potential to exert substantial influence on public opinions as non-state actors, also correspond to my proposition of the "intermediary" level of Chinese nationalism that is situated between the official and the grassroots. These two points form the conceptual basis for the empirical examination of their communications as propaganda, which is the dissemination and co/reproduction of nationalist messages. Establishing popular propagandists as the research object paves the way for addressing one of my sub-research questions: Who are the most influential popular propagandists on Weibo? Based on a seven-month close observation of Weibo and taking both platform mechanism and manual verification into consideration, I argue that popular propagandists are self-made media entrepreneurs who gains online influence by commenting on socio-political events.

In order to better understand what and how do popular propagandists communicate, I select ten most influential and representative actors from the list of communicators and focus on their communication activities on three up-to-date political events of

different natures during my seven-month observation. Qualitative content analysis, combining both code quantification and interpretative textual analysis, is used to analyse a randomly generated sample of posts produced by them during an event. The research design is justified on several grounds. First, my case selection and sampling addresses both the "eventfulness" and "everydayness" of propaganda, as propaganda inquiry should focus on how messages "attends to the immediacy of current events and constructs a continuous, lasting and total information environment (Ellul 1965). Second, the distinctive natures of the three events, on top of their up-to-datedness can shed light on different aspects of Chinese politics including both its domestic governance and foreign policy. Last but not least, the flexibility and inclusiveness of qualitative content analysis allows me to present both objective "facts" and interpretations of such "facts" based on contextual information.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part first bridges the concept of "popular propagandists" with the empirical research object nationalistic online key opinion leaders. Then, it maps the most influential popular propagandists on the social media platform Weibo and their basic demographic information. The second part discusses the research design and deals with the relevant epistemological and methodological challenges associated with qualitative content analysis, after which the analytical framework based on an original coding scheme is introduced to capture the communication activities of popular propagandists.

Research Objects

Online Key Opinion Leaders as Popular Propagandists

The previous two chapters have established a theoretical framework for studying propaganda and nationalism in the context of Chinese cyberspace. This thesis's theoretical position sees propaganda as a process of the co/reproduction and dissemination of cyber nationalism. This argument is based on two prerequisites. Firstly, propaganda is a sociological phenomenon more than political manipulation or deception. It is not restricted to formal political realms nor monopolized by professional propagandists but permeates into people's everyday life and involves various actors. Secondly, the expressions and dissemination of cyber nationalism go beyond the conceptualization of Chinese nationalism as "official vs. popular" (Anderson 2006). There exists an intermediary level between the official and grassroot, whose narratives and functions have long been overlooked. To address the overarching research question of the propagation of cyber nationalism, I highlight the role played by "popular propagandists", who are individual online key opinion leaders active on Sina Weibo, the largest social media platform in China. The empirical analysis will examine the communication activities of popular propagandists, with a particular focus on the nationalism themes and propaganda tactics reflected from their posts.

Existing literatures have various definitions of online key opinion leaders. The concept of opinion leader was first put forward by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in the two-step flow theory of persuasion (Lazarsfeld, et.al 1968). Opinion leaders act as intermediaries between mass media and society to pass on ideas they conceive from the mass media to their peers. They are related to the personification of certain values,

competence and strategic social location (Katz 1957). Though dubbed as “leader”, opinion leaders do not necessarily have privileged social background, whose “leadership” status is premised on better access to information and capability of influencing public opinions. Different benchmarks are used in identifying and selecting key opinion leaders, such as the number of followers and original posts, and the frequency of interacting with followers (Chen & Fu 2015). On Weibo, verified users with large number of followers and high (re)posting frequency are commonly regarded as opinion leaders. As Fu and Chau (2013) find out, more than half of Weibo accounts publish nothing, while more than 80 percent of original contents are produced by less than five percent of accounts. Previous studies have also shown that verified accounts are far more likely to produce (original) contents (Guan et.al 2014). The number of followers is believed to be positively related to that of posts (Lin & Zhang 2018) but has no significant influence over netizens’ willingness to follow their account (Luqiu et al., 2019). Most opinion leaders on Weibo are male, middled-aged, verified users, with tertiary-or-above education (Li 2012). In terms of profession, media workers take the largest share (30%), followed by celebrities (20%). Li’s research does not include media organizations and official agencies, an approach different from Bolsover’s (2013) which conceptualize Weibo service provider itself as the top opinion leaders, followed by news organizations. Tong and Zuo (2014) find out that ordinary people are the most active users on Weibo, but most of them are “listeners” rather than “producers” on the platform.

The two key objectives of Weibo’s key opinion leaders are recruiting more followers and soliciting their engagement with posted messages (Chen & Fu 2016). Also, Huang and Sun (2016) observe that Weibo users are more likely to engage with contents from

followers with whom they have a prior social tie, either online or offline. Therefore, the number of followers, retweets and comments all matter to an online key opinion leader's media presence and influence (Fu & Chau 2013; Hutto, et al. 2013). Trustworthiness and prior experience are also found to be significant criterion in defining online key opinion leaders. According to Huang and Sun (2014), netizens choose to follow someone because they trust them as reliable information source. Motivated by such trust, key opinion leaders are prompted to produce more quality information to maintain their reputation. Trustworthiness is influenced by various factors including verified identity (Chen & Fu 2015), reputation (Pu & Scanlan 2012), influence on other users (Donath & Boyd 2004), content quality (Zhang & Pentina 2012) and platform visibility based on its searching algorithm (Nah & Saxton 2013).

The operationalization of my theoretical position and research design are justified on the following grounds. First, examining nationalistic online key opinion leaders as popular propagandists can illustrate how cyber nationalism is propagated via the intermediary level of nationalism, which addresses my overarching research question. The fact that popular propagandists actively communicate with their audience on a daily basis corresponds to the "totality" of propaganda that permeates into people's everyday life. I do not treat popular propagandists as a homogenized group but as individual actors holding diverse views and rhetorical traits. The empirical analysis shall examine, disaggregate, and compare between different actors' performance across different cases. Moreover, popular propagandists are different from individual netizens, professional media practitioners and official propagandists in the sense that they are strategic commentators with the aim of gaining popularity. On the one hand, their status as online influencer differs them from individual netizens, because they

can exert greater influence on public opinions. On the other hand, they are in principle different from official propagandists or news outlets because they do not have a formal position in China's official propaganda apparatus, nor necessarily have formal institutional affiliation. Therefore, they do not conduct propaganda for the sake of it but have more complicated calculations about their status as online strategic communicators. Second, by foregrounding the communication activities of popular propagandists, I make substantial breakthrough on the "official vs. popular" paradigm in conceptualizing China's nationalism by illustrating the intermediary level of nationalism represented by popular propagandists. Examining their co/reproduction and dissemination of nationalist messages, I aim to demonstrate how the intermediary level relates to both official and popular nationalism. Third, by highlighting the personalized feature of popular propagandists, I extend the inquiry scope of non-state actors conducting digital propaganda from bots and "fifty-cent army" (Han 2015), "digital astroturfing" (Neagli 2021), platform and forum administrators (Han 2018) to incorporate online key opinion leaders, or in the Party-state's terminology, patriotic "big V" (*aiguo da V,* 爱国大 V).

This first sub-question this thesis addresses is "Who are the most influential popular propagandists active in Chinese cybersphere?" In order to compile a list of popular propagandists, I observe Weibo, a X-like platform in China for a period of seven months. Most existing research select Weibo's key opinion leaders based on most influential communicators in one or a handful of cases (Nip & Fu 2016; Wang et al., 2020; Zeng et al., 2019). My selection goes beyond specific political events jointly considers multiple indicators and approaches including Weibo's "V influence rank", keyword and hashtag search, "guerrilla ethnography" (Yang 2009: 22) and "app

walkthrough method" (Light et al., 2018)[5], and flexibly move between different topical issues, follow different links leading to different sections of the platform. As a result, I manage to target a group of actors who have long-term, enduring influence on the platform. Weibo classifies its platform's contents into 31 categories, such as gaming, sports, movies, animation, military and current affairs, each having its own V influence rank. The rank is updated weekly that lists popular accounts of verified individuals over a given period. Criterion for shortlisting include originality, views, likes, reposts and fan activeness. Manual examination of bloggers and posts reveal that actors from the "current affairs" and "military" categories are most relevant to my research. Over the seven months' time, a total of 84 V-ranking lists were published (42 for each category). Compared with the case-driven approach in identifying research subjects, my research design has the merit of including opinion leaders whose influence over online public sphere is consistent, long-term and enduring. It also excludes those actors who might only enjoy temporary popularity due to some sensational acts or events. Moreover, having a fixed group of actors also facilitates inter-case and inter-actor comparison of their propaganda messages. The next section presents the composition and demographic information of influential popular propagandists on Weibo, which are presented through Table 4.1 to 4.3.

[5] Most platforms, whether based in or outside of China, have their own matrixes to promote actors. Such mechanism is hardly transparent, but I consider this limitation is within acceptable boundary as platform mechanism constitutes part of the digital ecology popular propagandists operate in.

User Name	Gender	Description	Followings	Followers	Posts	Frequency
Hu Xijin	Male	Commentator for Global Times	303	24750000	10798	42
Shen Yi	Male	Politics Lecturer of Fudan University	1084	1850000	35232	36
DY	Male	Entertainment blogger	1284	2840000	104243	32
Sima Nan	Male	Host; Scholar	2504	3140000	59932	31
Lu Kewen	Male	Military Blogger	739	1190000	10158	30
FQY	Male	Current affairs commentator	1511	1360000	32935	20
KL	Male	Commentator for Toutiao	5241	2060000	65559	18
Zhang Zhou	Male	Technology Blogger	1620	2270000	40866	16
Tianjin	Male	Local news blogger	4291	2140000	367894	15
Shanghai	Male	Local news blogger	3045	1310000	50000	12
HW HR	Male	Berlin Industrial Uni Alumni Rep	188	1486000	25169	10
XGS	Male	Technology Blogger	609	1450000	8769	8
Changchun	Male	Local news blogger	418	1430000	12000	7
Xia Lian	Female	Individual Citizen	1100	2220000	4551	7
Xiangyang	Female	Local news blogger	131	156000	3547	6
Jinhua	Male	Local news blogger	1613	1010000	90000	6
Beijing DaFF	Male	Local news blogger	971	281000	91905	5
Qiao Mu	Male	Writer	769	718000	8166	5
France	Female	Vlogger; Toutiao commentator	633	735000	22054	5
Xu	Male	Commentator for Toutiao	2099	3190000	62874	4
ZSY	Male	Technology Blogger	2494	3970000	14913	4
Yu	Male	Local news blogger	3109	1250000	19257	4
Wang Bingru	Female	Phoenix News Journalist	537	4420000	6300	4
XM	Male	Local news blogger	1181	3760000	26863	4
dapiaoliang	Male	Video Blogger	800	181000	13628	4
jiangningpopo	Male	politics observer and commentator	822	6053000	28191	4

Chengdu	Male	Local news blogger	1222	2260000	30000	3
SWG	Male	Relationship Counselling Blogger	361	4270000	1122	3
Yiquan chaoren	Male	Video Blogger	644	150000	9220	3
Yuan Zhezhi	Male	Video Blogger	977	1010000	11494	2
Chongqing	Male	Local news blogger	879	633000	3889	2
Lao Dongyan	Female	Law Professor of Tsing-hua University	106	442000	Removed	2
X2019	Female	Vlogger	74	86000	11	2
Wang Xiao	Male	Host	835	1660000	2011	2
bunengbeinifaxian	Female	Individual Citizen	17	50000	4	2
vincent	Male	Video Blogger	269	142000	3434	2
lingeguancha	Male	human we media	1372	3802000	25725	2
Huajiao	Female	CCTV Journalist	?	?	?	1
Jinan	Female	Local news blogger	5344	1120000	60000	1
Xiong Six	Male	Cartoonist, Vlogger	3908	6560000	139866	1
Manchang	Male	Toutiao commentator	3233	699000	36581	1
Xiang LG	Male	Weibo we media	2665	1470000	74493	1
MS	Male	Local news blogger	864	3520000	20000	1
Li Miao	Female	Phoenix News Journalist	271	3580000	10000	1
zhaoze	Female	Individual citizen	74	77000	33	1
90hou	Male	Technology Blogger	2181	1199000	38502	1
yingwang	Male	Financial blogger	2950	3701000	81347	1
Chenchangyu	Male	individual citizen	35	9197	30	1
Huang Zhixian	Female	TV Host	59	1615000	3393	1
change	Female	commentator	1859	1217000	37494	1
yoyo	Female	Host	298	665000	220	1
zhuchiren	Male	Host	24	382000	69	1
yiwanhundouhua	Male	politics observer and commentator	2062	802000	36865	1
dagongzai	Female	video blogger	4	101000	39	1

Table 4.1: Top 10 of Weibo's "Current Affairs" V-influence List from September 2022 to February 2023 (1st March 2023)

User Name	Gender	Description	Followings	Followers	Posts	Frequency
KLLF	Male	Writer	1933	6430000	122483	42
Sifen	Male	Military Blogger, Former soldier	797	7410000	40000	42
Jin Canrong	Male	Expert in International Relations	171	2560000	3630	42
Henghe	Female	Military Blogger	3225	777000	33119	41
Hawk	Male	Translator, Military Blogger	634	2390000	120000	40
STK98	Male	Military blogger, Vlogger	1809	5520000	103544	26
Sky	Male	Military Blogger	405	16810000	20000	19
CYQ	Male	Technology blogger	797	2890000	60000	16
WH	Male	Military Blogger	417	306000	4047	9
Earth	Male	Military Blogger	335	1080000	30000	9
KTLJ	Male	Military Blogger	568	4570000	55841	9
SP	Male	Video Blogger	120	1120000	1257	8
VS	Male	Technology Blogger, commentator for Toutiao	1260	1730000	50000	8
Mianhua	Male	Military blogger	333	77000	8700	7
Rabbit	Male	Technology Blogger, video blogger	461	3190000	10000	6
WYQY	Male	Technology blogger	5046	8260000	50000	5
Pig	Female	Military blogger	714	84000	4100	5
Daniel	Male	Military blogger	122	84000	5881	5
Duck	Male	Vlogger, Military blogger	2245	62000	10656	5
ZZD	Male	Military blogeer	2652	1660000	40000	4
SNM	Male	Commentator for Toutiao	174	646000	50000	4
miaosila	Male	Military Blogger, Commentator for Toutiao	1403	1236000	3388	4
zhanlvegeju	Male	Military blogger	266	340000	8233	4
ZTS	Male	Technology Blogger	1980	938000	20000	3

Nanhai	Male	Military blogger; Toutiao author	75	713000	15330	3
Blue	Male	Military blogger, former soldier	2273	30000	30000	2
XYHX	Male	Military Blogger, Commentator for Toutiao	1706	342000	20000	2
Jin Yanxi	Male	Vlogger	815	26000	2849	2
Junji	Male	Military blogger	351	1080000	19112	2
DS Beifeng	Male	Vlogger, Military blogger	2832	9840000	70859	2
ZDS	Male	Military Blogger, Commentator for Toutiao	3451	1960000	3042	1
Jinling	Male	Military Blogger	2944	4220000	110000	1
Yixin Yiyi	Male	Military blogger	2277	216000	10098	1
Elephant	Male	Military Blogger, Commentator for Toutiao	1005	1100000	80000	1
BJTL	Male	Military blogger	971	758000	10000	1
dapeng	Male	military blogger	457	1340000	12577	1
Jia	Male	Technology blogger	390	52000	2071	1
Tihu	Male	Military blogger	909	22000	12356	1
Cainiao	Male	Military blogger; technology blogger	369	2815000	34241	1
Xunya	Male	Pet Blogger	1109	2591000	30326	1
zuochaijia	Male	video blogger	185	2166000	2352	1

Table 4.2: Top 10 of Weibo's "Military" V-influence List from September 2022 to February 2023 (1st March, 2023)

	Average	Highest	Lowest
Posts	38,513	367,894	11
Followers	2.63 million	24.75 million	26,000
Followings	1465	5344	74
Male users (%)		**Female users (%)**	
83		17	

Table 4.3: Summary of key statistics from V-influence rankings

Mapping China's Popular Propagandists

Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 list all the actors who have made to top the 10 of each category's weekly list. Table 4.3 summarize the key information such as number followers and posts, and gender distribution of the whole sample. Each weekly list consists of 100 actors, and the decision to include only the top 10 actors is to make sure all those included are the most influential and representative cases, as the list's composition is quite volatile. The number of posts, followings and followers vary between different users (See Table 4.3). There are several key takeaways from their demographic information. First, only a handful of individuals are able to maintain long-term influence as popular propagandists, as the list has a high turnover rate. Throughout the seven-month period, 95 different actors in total have made to the top 10 of the ranking, 54 of whom are from the "current affairs" section, and 41 from "military" section. However, roughly half of them appear on the list for no more three times. Second, the gender composition of popular propagandists is disproportionately dominated by male, as less than 20% of registered female users are included the list. The ratio becomes even more imbalanced when it comes the most influential ones – Only one female user (Henghe) appears at the top of the pyramid. As these users have all been verified by the platform, we have good reason in believing their stated gender

and background information. These findings are in line with previous literature's findings that China has more male social media users than female ones (Fu & Chan 2013). My finding on the gender composition of popular propagandists also reaffirms the masculine characteristic of Chinese nationalism (Wu 2014: 246-248), despite more recent studies' findings on the active presence of "little pink" and "fandom nationalism" which is mainly driven by female users (Wang 2022; Fang & Repnikova 2018).

Third, most of the popular propagandists have built up their online influence up from scratch, rather than relying on their reputation in the physical world. Only nine figures from the list are known for their real identity and have their names publicly displayed. They come from mixed backgrounds: three of them are academics based in Chinese university (Shen Yi, Jin Canrong and Lao Dongyan), four of them are (former) journalists (Hu Xijin, Wang Bingru, Wang Bingbing and Li Miao), and two have mixed background in academics, journalism and entertainment industry (Sima Nan and Wang Xiao). In other words, being well-known in the physical world does not guarantee one's online influence, a finding contrasting the established opinion that Weibo's most influential key opinion leaders tend to be famous journalists (Nip & Fu 2016). This difference is either due to the different sampling methods or the change of Weibo landscape over the years. Last but not least, even when the sampling method has already prioritized political commentator by targeting "current affairs" and "military" sections, many identified actors remain apolitical. It turns out that many included in the list are local news bloggers, who share mostly apolitical information and local affairs without engaging with geopolitical events. This finding reaffirms the argument that Weibo is largely an apolitical sphere (Sullivan 2014).

Research Design

Case Selection and Sampling

Propaganda must be timely and appeal to the "volatile immediacy" of current events (Ellul 1965: 43), towards which the public are most sensitive. The empirical analysis of this thesis is based on a qualitative content analysis of three cases which happened during the period of August 2022 to February 2023. The three cases are 1) Former US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022; 2) China's anti-lockdown protests in November 2022; 3) China's "surveillance balloon" intruding US airspace in February 2023. The three cases are selected based on the consideration of their timeliness and implications for different aspects of Chinese nationalism, its domestic politics and international relations. A sample of 100 posts[6] is randomly selected from each actor on each case for in-depth qualitative content analysis. I consider the number as a reasonable sum to constitute a corpus upon which in-depth manual analysis can be performed. Efforts are taken to ensure the sampled posts are equally distributed across the timeline. I collect my sampled posts from all posts across the timeline, rather than focusing case-specific ones. This arrangement allows me to compare between the "eventfulness" and "everydayness of popular propagandists' communication. Total propaganda, the concept underpinning the research design, goes beyond political events and taps into the and people's everyday life and their social beliefs (Ellul 1965: 18; Edelstein 1997: 259-270; Zhang & Cameron 2004). Therefore, I argue that the examination of propaganda messages has to go beyond the eventful dimension and include the everyday political communications. This analytical strategy

[6] For actors who issued less than 100 posts during a case, all their posts will be included in the sample.

helps to illuminate whether and how the discussion of a specific case brings changes to propaganda activities. The following sections first address the methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis and explains this thesis's methodological positions, then lay out the design of the coding framework for empirical analysis.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Content analysis includes a variety of systematic, rule-guided toolkits for analysing the informational contents of textual data (Mayring 2000). It is broadly divided into the quantitative and qualitative approaches, which are united by the key feature of systematically categorizing textual data in order to make sense of it (Miles et al., 2020). Qualitative content analysis categorizes data based on inductively generated indicators and through in-depth reading (Morgan 1993). As a research method, it is a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt 1992; Schreier 2012). The debates on qualitative content analysis as a research approach centres on whether the analysis involves the use of counting and statistical methods (Forman & Damschroder 2007: 40; Morgan 1993; Sandelowski 2000; Mayring 2000; Patton 2002). Recent developments in different disciplines, however, have led to a greater variety of approaches in conducting qualitative content analysis, moving from "a counting game" to incorporating more interpretative approach into the qualitative paradigm (Schreier 2012; Egberg-Thyme et al., 2013; Lindgren et al., 2014).

As a research method rooted in different scientific paradigms, qualitative content analysis faces various challenges concerning its ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects (Graneheim et al., 2016: 19). The ontological assumption

concerning the state of "truth" depends on the researcher's choice between positivistic or heuristic positions. Contrary to the quantitative content analysis which seeks "truth" based on minimal interpretation of data, qualitative content analysis's epistemological position regards interpretation as a co-creation between the researchers and the text (Mishler 1986), and views a text containing more than one meaning (Sandelowski 2011). Following either phenomenological or hermeneutic approaches to the objects of study, researchers place varying levels of emphasis on the description of manifest contents and the interpretation of latent meanings (Graneheim et al., 2016: 30). In this thesis, I consider my epistemological position as post-positivism (or neo-positivism), which aims to getting closer to "truth" and abstract knowledge from the elusive and complex social reality, albeit acknowledging its imperfection (Alina-Pisano 2009; Jackson 2008). This epistemological position is in line with my overarching research question and the research design based on qualitative content analysis. It also allows me to offer interpretative findings without sliding into a radical relativist agenda.

The methodological approach of qualitative content analysis can be either inductive or deductive. The inductive approach, also known as data-driven or text-driven approach (Schreier 2012; Krippendorff 2018), looks for similarities or differences in the data and moves from findings to themes. This approach faces the challenges of getting stuck at superficial level of empirical summaries (Eriksson & Lindström 1997). The deductive approach, also known as the concept-driven approach (Schreier 2012), moves from theory to data and often tests existing theoretical models against the data. The challenges of the deductive approach arise from limiting coding categories exclusively to the those prescribed by the theory (Eriksson & Lindström 1997). The emerging third approach is the abductive approach, also known as complementary

(Blackstone 2018), combined (Elo & Kyngäs 2008), retroductive (Sayer 1992) or fuzzy logic (Rolfe 1997). Under this approach, the researcher moves back and forth between inductive and deductive approaches at different stages of the analysis based on the needs or new insights drawn from data. In this thesis, I choose the abductive approach because it allows for greatest flexibility in approaching a novel case as popular propagandists.

The empirical analysis is conducted in the following steps. First, an initial coding scheme is developed based on relevant literatures about propaganda and nationalism. Second, inductive category development based on a randomly generated sample of 500 posts (50 from each communicator) is conducted to further develop the initial coding scheme. Data that cannot be coded in the first round are identified and analysed through the inductive category development to determine if they represented a new category or a subcategory of existing codes. Previously designed subcodes which do not account for significant portions are reconsidered or deleted. The addition of new categorizations or the removal of old ones are in turn operationalized in the coding scheme for reference. The third step is to count the recurrence of each subcodes, which are analysed as different "categories", from the sampled posts of the three different cases (Morse 2008). The analysis of each category focuses on the manifest and descriptive level of meanings. The last step builds on the insights drawn from the quantification of codes and turns to the textual level, interpreting how different categories are expressed by text. The analysis of descriptive themes focuses on both the latent and (a moderate level of) interpretative meanings within the text (Morse 2008).

I take a small-N approach and aim to offer descriptive, rather than causal inferences. This decision is made based on the nature of the research question and the objects under investigation. Though the topic of China's (cyber) nationalism and its expressions have received extensive scholarly discussions (Ma 2015; Burcu 2022; Huang et al., 2019), the role played by nationalistic online key opinion leaders as popular propagandists in the (re/co)-production and dissemination of cyber nationalism is a novel issue. A small-N approach allows me to dive deeper into each case and reach moderate level of confidence in generalizing the findings and link them to broader literature of propaganda and nationalism. Reporting descriptive rather than casual interferences is due to the explorative nature of this research, since it does not aim to predict the activities of popular propagandists. Instead, I aim to provide a detailed account of the communication activities of a previously understudied group of actors, based on which new inferences can be made regarding the broader theoretical questions of propaganda and nationalism. The three cases are selected because each of them can generate different insights into the propagation of cyber nationalism. The Pelosi episode is expected to show how popular propagandists react to the perceived infringe upon China's core interest represented by the Taiwan issue. The protest case will reveal how they react towards a domestic public opinion crisis and collective actions against the background of Covid-19. The balloon saga positions China in an awkward position as it initiated a diplomacy crisis, to which the reactions from popular propagandists are worth exploring. Furthermore, all three cases are timely events of significance to the research of China's international relations and domestic governance.

Alternative research design based on a discourse-centred approach (Ma 2015) or an interview-based data collection (Burcu 2022) can generate different insights. Nevertheless, I consider my research design is appropriate because my research question concerns more on the representation and descriptions of a phenomenon (Downe-Wamboldt 1992; Schreier 2012), rather than revealing the power relationships or the social construction of discourses. The choice of online data over interview-generated data is both due to the challenges posed by Covid-19 restrictions and the difficulty and risks of accessing this group of actors. Moreover, this research is not so much concerned with the "why" question than the "what" and "how" question regarding the propagation of cyber nationalism. Therefore, I consider my methodological approach and research design feasible to answer the research question.

Analytical Framework

After establishing the list of popular propagandists on Weibo, I turn to the second sub-question: "What does popular propagandists' propaganda and nationalism profiles look like, as reflected from their communications of different political events?" To address this question, I construct an analytical framework based on an original coding scheme that covers propaganda and nationalism, as well as other aspects of the communication activities. Drawing on existing literature which deploy similar methods (Sullivan & Sapir 2012; Renz & Sullivan 2013), I include the following coding category in the scheme: Originality, Propaganda, Nationalism, Meta Themes, Transmission. From Table 4.4 to 4.7, I present some examples corresponding to each subcodes, following which I will also explain my rationale of including and capturing them.

Each post will be coded for five times. Originality code records if a post represent the original thoughts and narratives from the account owner. A post is coded as “original” if it is not a repost of other posts. Posts contain minimal amount of information, such as those only having emojis or less than 5 Chinese characters are also considered as “repost”. The Meta-theme code is informed by the conceptualization of multiple public spheres on Weibo (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015). It includes the following four subcodes: domestic affairs, foreign affairs, China in international affairs and local affairs. Examples of this code are presented in Table 4.4. The “local” subcode is not restricted to news and events of physical localities but also those germane to the online setting as well as the blogger’s personal issues without broader geopolitical or sociological implications. The “transmission” code is designed based on the assumption that popular propagandists are situated between the “official” and “grassroots” and play the function of transmission belt. The transmission might happen in different ways, such as the top-down transmission of relaying official lines, the bottom-up transmission of presenting public sentiments, or the horizontal communication with other communicators. Examples of this code are presented in Table 5.5.

Category	Definition	Examples
Domestic affairs	China's domestic affairs, which tend to be themes and problems of national significance.	Online discussions of epidemic control are full of "name-calling" and conflicts. Experts should bring discussions back to the trajectory of science.
World affairs	Situations about other countries without mentioning China.	The UK's marine rescue service sends illegal migrants directly to the beach. That's so nice of them.
China in international affairs	China's engagement with other countries/international organizations.	The geopolitical situation around China has been deteriorating, but we have also been accumulating and coordinating resources and tools responding to challenges at a faster pace.
"Local" affairs	Local news, things happening on China's cybersphere and apolitical issues without having (inter)national significance.	This is what a customer documented in a Dalian's luxury Japanese restaurant……Are you being serious? "I notice some typical opinions from the Internet: Someone would lambast the commercialization of housing and health care, while simultaneously kissing the US's ass."
Others	Posts not belonging to the above categories.	Follow my account's fan group!

Table 4.4: Examples of "Meta themes" Code

Category	Definition	Examples
Top-down	Reaching out or engaging with official actors; Explaining, communicating specific official policies or official line" in general to the audience	[How to understand the updated Covid policies and what are the rationales behind it?] This article helps you understand it. @People's Daily: Official Reponses towards Taiwan Independence Force – Their end is nigh.
Bottom-up	Reaching out or engaging with ordinary netizens, such as replying to their comments, or reposting their contents	@祁人祁语 Different perspectives on Covid prevention policies should by no means turn into opposition against our government.
Horizontal	Engaging with fellow popular propagandists.	@ShenYi I agree with Professor Shen's remarks. Indeed, the US should brace for fierce retaliation from us.
Other	Engaging with other actors, for example, media accounts	@SinaNews Check out this cute dog!

Table 4.5: Example of "Transmission" Code

The “propaganda” code is designed from a concretization of specific tactics typical of different types of propaganda according to the theories of Ellul and Edelstein. Examples of each subcode of it are presented in Table 4.6. The subcode “prescribing” is a key feature of political and agitational propaganda, where the communicator establishes a general line, deliver a clear argument, or display contain clear intention to ask the public to follow certain actions. Contrary to the hard, pathological style of “prescribing” is the more subtle and persuasive “expressing opinions”. As a typical feature of sociological propaganda, a communicator shares their opinions without explicit calls for public adherence. “Emotional expressions”, a key feature of agitational and irrational propaganda, refers to communicators’ displays of strong emotions in their communications and direct appeals to the audience emotions. “Embrace of stability” or the status quo is a key feature of integration propaganda, where the author highlights the merit or significance of stability, give positive comments towards the status quo. It corresponds to the enduring theme of “maintaining stability” (*weiwen*, 维稳) emphasized by Chinese government (Brady 2009: 44). “Information sharing”, a key feature of rational propaganda, refers to the sharing of factual and neutral information without expressing one’s own views. Similar tactics are observed in the Party-state’s “revolutionizing” of media narratives by operating and supporting news outlets such as *The Paper* which provides more investigational reports (Repnikova & Fang 2019). “Interactive communication” captures the dimension of horizontal propaganda, where the author directly converses with other users by replying or the “@” function. Such practices are also observed in authoritarian participatory propaganda that encourages public participation (Repnikova & Fang 2018). “Reposting official sources”, a key feature of vertical

propaganda, relays messages from official sources without adding one's own opinions. "Neologism" captures the synergies between popular culture and propaganda, a key feature of new propaganda. The practice is also known as generating "uninym" (Edelstein 1997: 23), which is a fusion of different words to generate new ones. In the context of digital communication, the creation of uninyms reflects the distinctive rituals, practices and rhetoric of different online (sub)cultural groups. Therefore, I include the use of online buzz words, popular catchphrases, memes, and the references to various forms of digital/popular (sub)cultures under this subcode.

Nationalism is a sophisticated concept covering many aspects, to which the application of qualitative content analysis is challenging (Wang & Tao 2021; Schenk 2012; Soper & Fetzer 2018). This thesis's operationalization of (cyber)nationalism aims to present the distinctive nationalist themes displayed by popular propagandists' communications. The subcodes are summarized based on the prominent themes identified from Chinese nationalism as illustrated in Chapter Two. Considering the nature of China as a Party-state and the status of nationalism as the de-facto official ideology, I argue the overlaps between the national and the state/political power is inevitable. Such overlap is not a result of conceptual confusion, as nationalism does have an authoritarian dimension (Adorno et.al., 1950), but a design in line with China's political reality. The subcodes are summarized as below, with typical examples of which presented in Table 4.7:

1) Anti-foreign. Nationalism often involves derogation of groups who are not considered as part of the nation (Schatz et.al., 1999). In the case of China, such sentiment is rooted its own history of foreign invasion and colonization in the late 19th and early 20th century. The theme is further amplified by the CPC's

"patriotic education", which highlights the pre-PRC history as "century of humiliation" and often carries explicitly hostile tones towards foreign countries such as the US and Japan (Wu 2014; Scott 2008). Under President Xi, the anti-foreign sentiments extend to the ideological realm by opposing Western ideologies such as liberalism, division of power and pluralism.

2) Cohesion. As Edney (2012, 2015) points out, cohesion (*ning ju*, 凝聚) is a unifying theme in Chinese nationalism, calling for the unity between different ethnic groups, different social classes, the party and the people, as well as between mainland China and Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan. This subcode covers the narratives related to China's sovereignty, territorial integrity as well as the call for unity among different groups of people.

3) National pride. Nationalism can exemplify as a feeling of pride in one's own nation (Kosterman & Feshbach 1989). China's national pride has both a pre-PRC foundation as its rich historic and cultural legacy and one premised on the PRC's nation building process (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). With Xi Jinping's promotion of "confident rise" and the "China path", national pride is boosted among the Chinese public (Poh & Li 2017). This subcode covers narratives celebrating China's achievements and the general feeling of being proud to be a Chinese.

4) Statism. Nationalism harbors an authoritarian dimension manifest as an uncritical acceptance of political authority (Levinson 1950, Meloen 1999). In the case of China, such authority is premised on the CPC's portrayal of itself as the guardian of the Chinese nation and Chinese people, and expressed as the unquestionable legitimacy of the Chinese Party-state. This subcode captures

messages expressing trust, fondness and support for official actors including the Party, government, PLA or specific leaders.

5) Denouncing "traitor". Hostility derived from nationalism is not only directed towards outsiders, but also towards in-groups' ambivalent attitudes towards the nation (Adorno et al., 1950: 729). This theme has its historical root in the expression of "traitor to the Han race" (*hanjian*, 汉奸), a phrase emerging in the 20th century China referring to those compliant with foreign invaders and has been enthusiastically reproduced via the patriotic education (Ke 2015). In the contemporary context, this subcode further captures narratives showing excessive fondness of foreign habits or ideas (Zhang 2017, 2020). A "traitor" not necessarily has to be close to foreign forces, as those appear critical to the regime can also be assigned such label.

6) Idealization of the nation. It refers to those "generalized and undifferentiated, conventionalized terms which primarily glorify external features of physical appearance or overt behavioral conduct rather than involving the more internal aspects" of a nation (Adorno et al., 1950: 340). It is closely linked to the Ellulian myth as "an all-encompassing, activating image… that have lost their material, practical character" (Ellul 1965: 31). The idealization of Chinese nation is expressed as the love for "motherland" (Louie 2000), the "dragon" analogy (Wu 2014) and the "middle kingdom", the "China Dream" and the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Brown 2022). This subcode captures narratives using symbolism depicting the Chinese nation in an effort to ascend its status.

7) Critical Nationalism. Chinese nationalists do not unconditionally support the regime (He 2017; Han 2018). Their concern for the Chinese nation can transform into criticisms on government actors of self-reflection. Such discontents arise from several reasons, including the deficiencies in administration, policy mistakes, and the perceived weakness in state responses towards foreign transgressions and the irrational nationalist expressions (Shirk 2007). Therefore, this sub-code captures two types of messages: the critical voices towards the official actors and those reflexive nationalist expressions.
8) Belligerence. Chinese nationalism, in particular the branch of intellectual nationalism, embraces militarism and contains strong intentions to fight against external enemies or those perceived as a threat to the Chinese nation (Wang 2005; Wang et al. 1999). As China's national power grows, such belligerent narratives also feature expansionism (Yang 2018: 9), legitimizing the use of power in protecting national interest. This subcode captures those narratives displaying aggressiveness, a willingness to fight or resort to military options.

Category	Example
Prescribing	On the one hand, we should fully support the state's countermeasures. On the other hand, we should guard against some hostile forces contaminating online public opinions…….
Expressing opinions	We don't need to blame ourselves too much for our being "utilitarian" though. Accepting us as common folks also deserves praise. Accepting ourselves, respecting others and encouraging ourselves to have more positive feelings are good.
Emotional expression	#Only Chinese people have sayings over Taiwan's affairs# Shameless! Despicable! Anyone offends us will pay prices. Anyone infringes upon China's sovereignty will payback tenfold.
Embrace of stability/status quo	Five major SOEs are delisted from the US's stock market…It would be an exaggeration to call it a complete "decoupling" between China and the US, or even hypothesizing an all-out conflict between the two. Sino-US cooperation fits the interest of globalization. Considering the huge size of Chinese market, it would be self-harming if the US decouples with China and hands this opportunity to other Western competitors.
Information sharing	Shakespeare Globe Theatre rewrites history: Joan of Arc will be portrayed as gender neutral "he".
Interactive communication	Reply @xxx: Those manufacturing industries snatching away by the US must be "rainbow colour", which can produce US-recognized, advanced gender identity & LGBTQ industry.
Reposting official actors	(Any reposts on official media, such as People's Daily, CCTV News or Xinhua News Agencies)
Neologism	Eagle (emoji): politely but firmly state that it has no interest of a conflict with those flying objects from the Rabbit (emoji) side, which is completely unnecessary, avoidable and brings no honour.

Table 4.6: Examples of "Propaganda" Code

Category	Examples
Anti-foreign	The US seems like a hooligan who likes to provoke on others but is afraid of fighting.
cohesion	# Taiwan is China's Taiwan# Our generation is lucky enough to see the reunification with Hong Kong and Macau. The next step is the liberation and reunification with Taiwan. Facing such challenges, we should unite and weather the storm together, and stay alert to those trying to divide us.
National pride	#China has generated magnetic field more than 900,000 times bigger than that of earth# China is awesome!
Statism	I believe our government will definitely take countermeasures, including military actions. With the national reputation at risk, how could we not take countermeasures? Farewell, Grandpa Jiang (Zemin)! I have always been your admirer since a child, and I will continue to follow our Party's steps, forever!
Denouncing traitors	We should despise those people who are undermining our government's efforts, and absolutely support our government's decision, because they are in the best position to serve our people's interest.
Idealization of the Nation	Chinese society has gradually walked out of the historical shadow since 1840. It is rediscovering itself and imagining big for the future.
Critical Nationalism	Jiangxi government has published their investigation on the staff. Since he is part of them, they surely want to calm down the issue. But the investigation results cannot persuade the public from doubting on the staff and his families' involvement in corruption. Patriotism should be diversified and inclusive. Different people should be allowed to have their own opinions. We are not aiming for "one voice".
Belligerence	If the US sent out warplanes to protect Pelosi, then the situation escalates into invasion. Under such circumstance, our military should use all means to prevent them from entering (Taiwan). If the warnings did not work, then I think it is ok to shoot down Pelosi's plane.
None	China should remain neutral on Russia-Ukraine conflicts, and this is of our best interest.
Other	The "capital" is harming our people's interest……The corporate-capitalist alliance is colluding against our people.

Table 4.7: Examples of "Nationalism" Code

Summary

This chapter discusses the methodological approach and the method of empirical inquiry in order to address the overarching research question: How is cyber nationalism propagated by nationalistic online key opinion leaders acting in the capacity as popular propagandists? I start with demonstrating how nationalistic online key opinion can be conceptualized as popular propagandists and why their communication activities can be examined through the lens of propaganda. I argue that their potential as online influencers in the information dissemination process and their primary agenda in discussing socio-political issues and propagating nationalist messages bring them in line with my theoretical position. Their disaffiliation from official institutions determines their "popular", rather than "professional" nature as a propagandist. Under such premise, I produce a list of most influential popular propagandists on Weibo based on platform mechanisms and manual verification. The mapping of popular propagandists paves the way for the empirical enquiry and addresses the "who" question regarding the demographic information of popular propagandists: They are predominantly male, self-made "Big-V" users boasting large number of followers, most of whom have little or no prior experience as media practitioners. They have a primary agenda in discussing social, political and military issues, a fact both recognized by the platform and verified by manual examination.

Having established my research subjects and addressed the first sub-question, I illustrate my research design based on a qualitative content analysis of three crucial political events. Ten communicators are selected for their representativeness and influence from the above list, whose posts are subject to further coding and textual analysis. The three political events are chosen for their timeliness, importance and

their implications concerning different dimensions of Chinese politics. Posts for content analysis are randomly sampled and evenly distributed across each political event's timeline, a research design reveals whether and how much changes are brough by a case to popular propagandists' communications. The analytical strategy of content analysis begins with the quantification of communication habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles based on an originally designed coding scheme, followed by an in-depth, interpretative textual analysis to reveal how the salient codes are expressed. This arrangement allows me to capture different aspects of popular propagandists' communication, such as posting frequency, propaganda tactics and nationalism themes. Both quantification of codes and interpretation of texts are important to bridge the empirical findings with theories of propaganda and nationalism, respectively addressing the "what" and "how" sub-questions of the propagation of cyber nationalism.

Chapter Five: Mapping the Activities of Popular Propagandists: Insights from the Codes

Introduction

This section presents coding results which capture popular propagandists' posting habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles. These findings reveal what and how popular propagandists communicate with their audience. Indicators including posting frequency, posting length, transmission functions, propaganda tactics and nationalism themes will be presented and compared across different cases and between different actors. Case-specific posts directly related to three selected political events are singled out for further analysis to understand whether and to what extent a political event dominates a communicator's discussion agenda and changes their propaganda styles.

I consider an overview of the textual data from code quantification is of great importance to my research question. Theoretically, indicators such as posting frequency the attention received by a specific issue and particular categories of propaganda and nationalism profiles provide the empirical basis to theorize and distinguish between different types of propaganda. The varying emphasis placed on different nationalism themes also contribute to a better understanding of the composition of China's (cyber) nationalism. Likewise, the shares of different transmission functions also help to conceptualize popular propagandists as the intermediary level between the official and the grassroots. The substance of these findings answers the "what" question regarding the propagation of cyber nationalism by revealing their propaganda and nationalism profiles. They also partially answer the "how" question by illustrating varying emphasis put on different propaganda tactics,

nationalism themes and other aspects of communication by different actors. Last but not least, the overview provides the context for the in-depth textual analysis by indicating specific subcodes which are of particular importance to understanding the propagation of cyber nationalism.

This chapter begins with presenting the quantification of coding results related to popular propagandists' posting habits, followed by their propaganda tactics and nationalism themes. Comparative analysis is made across all sections regarding both the inter-case and inter-actor dimensions, as well as the differences between the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of their propaganda activities. The results show a variety of communication patterns of popular propagandists in terms of their posting habits, propaganda profile and nationalism themes. While a certain actor is likely to maintain consistency in their posting length and frequency, greater variations appear in their propaganda tactics and nationalism themes when commenting on different political events.

Posting Habits

Communication Activeness

The posting habits of popular propagandists vary substantially in length and frequency (see Figure 1 and 2). [7] Typically, there are two types of productiveness among popular propagandists: The first one is represented by Hu Xijin, who tends to write long posts but post with less frequency. The second type is represented by Hawk, who posts with high frequency but in few words. The rest of actors lie somewhere in between the two

It is worthwhile to note that the information richness of each Chinese character is 3 three times higher than that of English.

extremes. It would be wrong, therefore, to judge the activeness and productivity of an actor solely based on their posting frequency or posting length. When it comes to the inter-case comparison, actors who post with higher frequency (such as Hawk and Henghe) or write longer posts (such as Hu Xijin and Sima Nan) tend to experience greater variations than their less active peers. Nevertheless, such variations do not alter the intra-case comparison of communicative activeness or voluminousness between different actors. In other words, despite the high variations in their posting frequency and posting length between different cases, the most active popular propagandists remain more or less the same in each case. On average, the Pelosi case elicits the higher quantity and voluminousness of posts compared with the other two cases, while the anti-lockdown case elicits the least heated discussions. This finding indicates that the Pelosi case bears distinctive feature of political propaganda and agitation propaganda (Ellul 1965: 63, 71), where a large volume of messages about a specific issue is propagated in a short period. Considering the high stakes involved in this case, the high propaganda intensity can be expected.

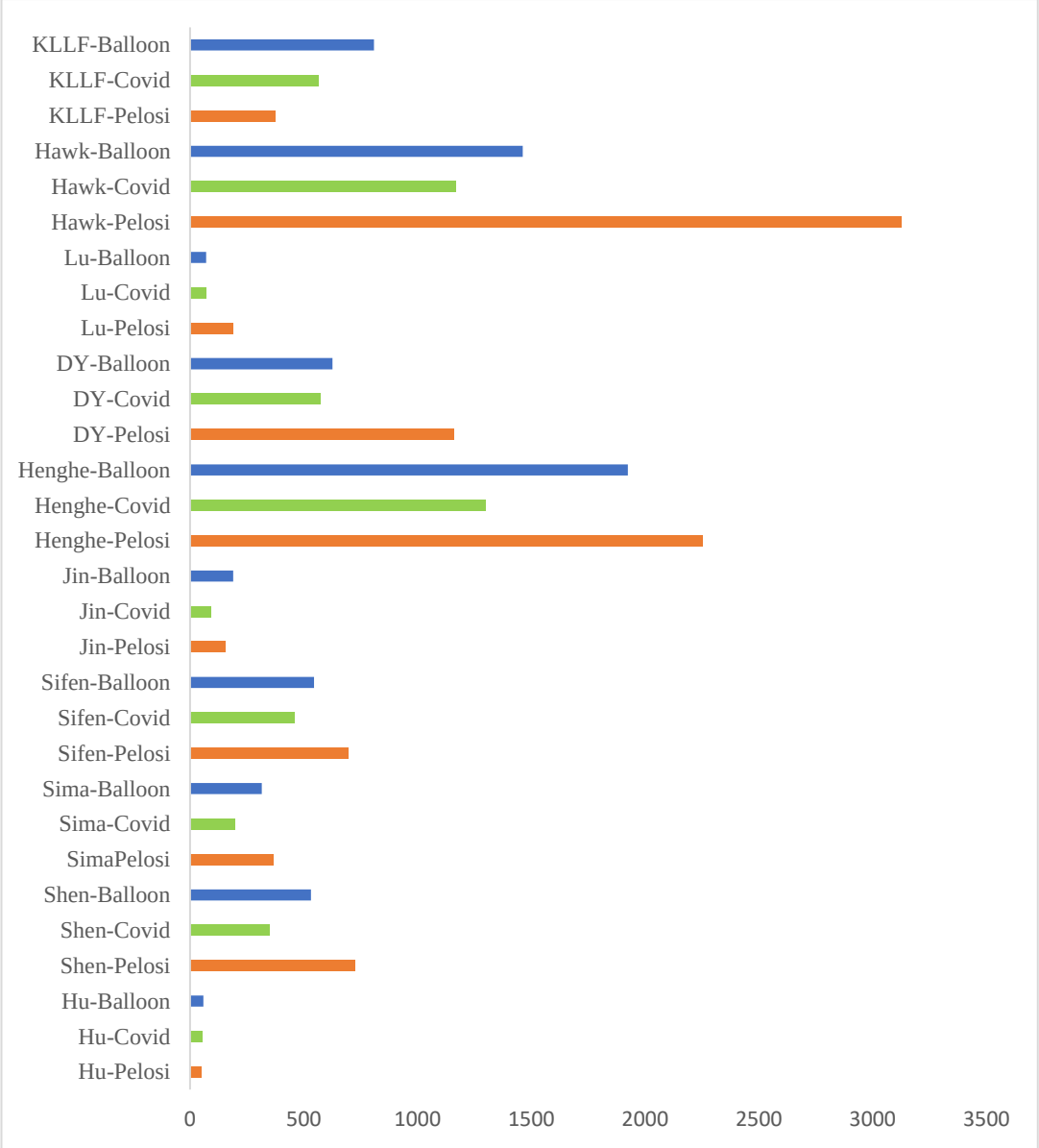


Figure 5.1: Posting Frequency

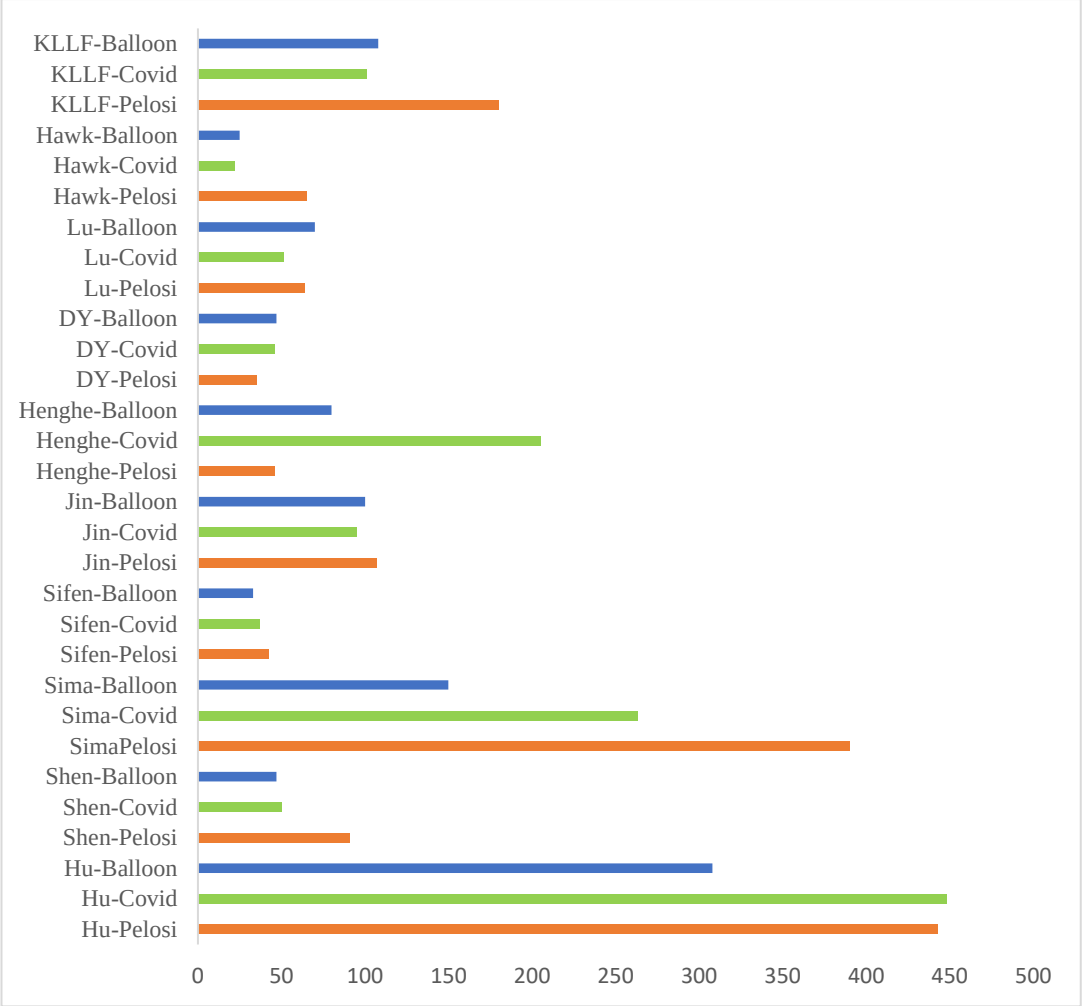


Figure 5.2: Posting Length

All posts are further examined on the basis of actor and date as shown by figure 3 to figure 5. This is to investigate whether there exists any consistent and cross-actor variation in communication activeness in each case. It appears that the Pelosi case shows the most discernible patterns. As shown in figure 3, an increase in communicative activeness was observed in almost all actors on the day before Pelosi landed in Taiwan. This is followed by a sharp drop a day later on August 3. I tentatively interpret this variation pattern as the initial efforts of mobilization was

replaced by appeasement. Momentum in communication was regained on the following day when Pelosi left Taiwan on August 4. Apart from this period, a discreet rise in communication activeness is observed on August 8, coinciding the commencement of China's large-scaled military drill in the Taiwan strait. The cross-actor variation in the Pelosi case is a sign of information control, a common tactic taken by Chinese authority in response to the outbreak of sensitive events (Roberts 2018: 99-102). The other two cases show less consistent patterns. Despite the sensitivities, neither the initial fire incident in Xinjiang nor the outbreak of protests led to a substantial drop in communication activeness. Popular propagandists might voluntarily steer clear of the two sensitive topics, and thus had no need to scale down their normal discussions. The Balloon case equally saw no discernible patterns in variation of communication activeness. The differences in communication activeness further affirms the Pelosi visit as a typical example of the Ellulian political propaganda (Ellul 1965: 63), where great uniformity in communication activeness is expected. However, there are also seemingly contradictory signs pointing to opposing types of propaganda. For example, the steep rise and drop in communication activeness prior to and after Pelosi's landing suggest contrasting indications of agitation and integration propaganda. Similarly, the increase of posts commencing the start of military drill can be interpreted either as agitation propaganda to rally public support or as integration propaganda to defend the state's response (Ellul 1965: 73-75). Theoretically, this finding suggests the possibility of the coexistence of assumingly contradictory types of propaganda classified by Ellul, a point that requires further examination. An in-depth reading into the textual data would help to illuminate this point.

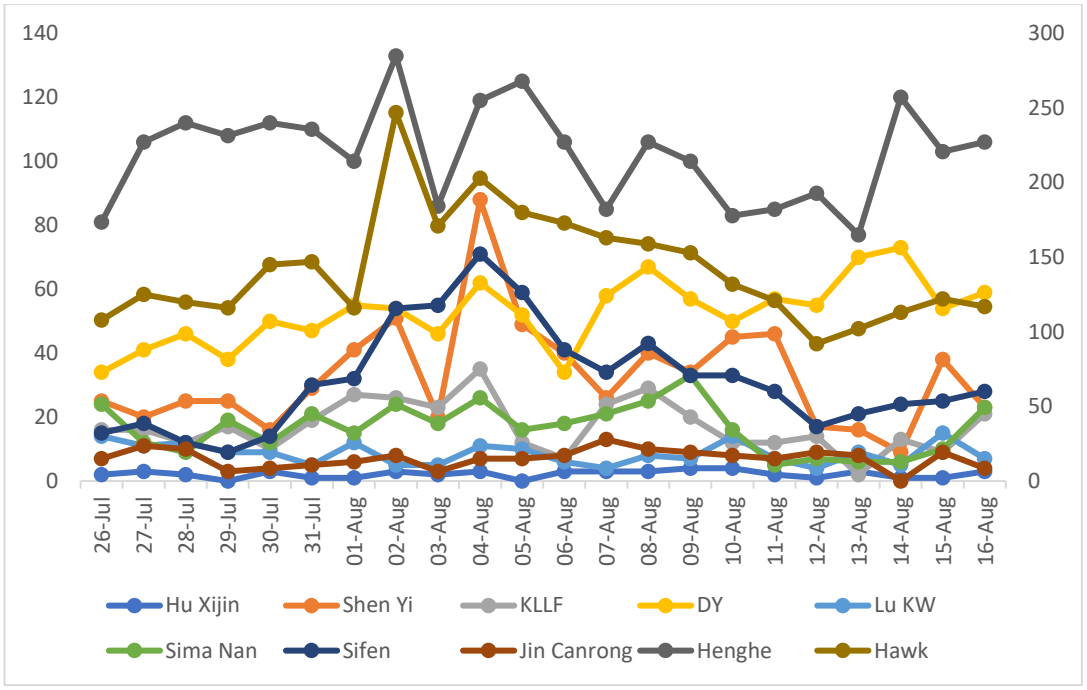


Figure 5.3: Daily Variation of Posts (Pelosi visit)

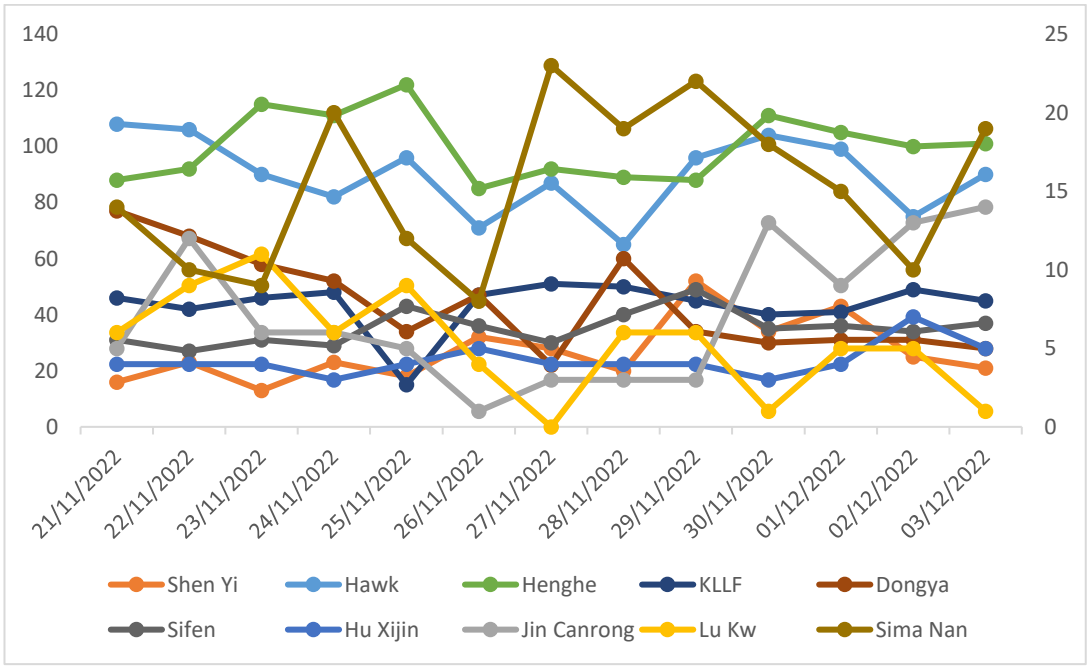


Figure 5.4: Daily Variation of Posts (Covid & Protest)

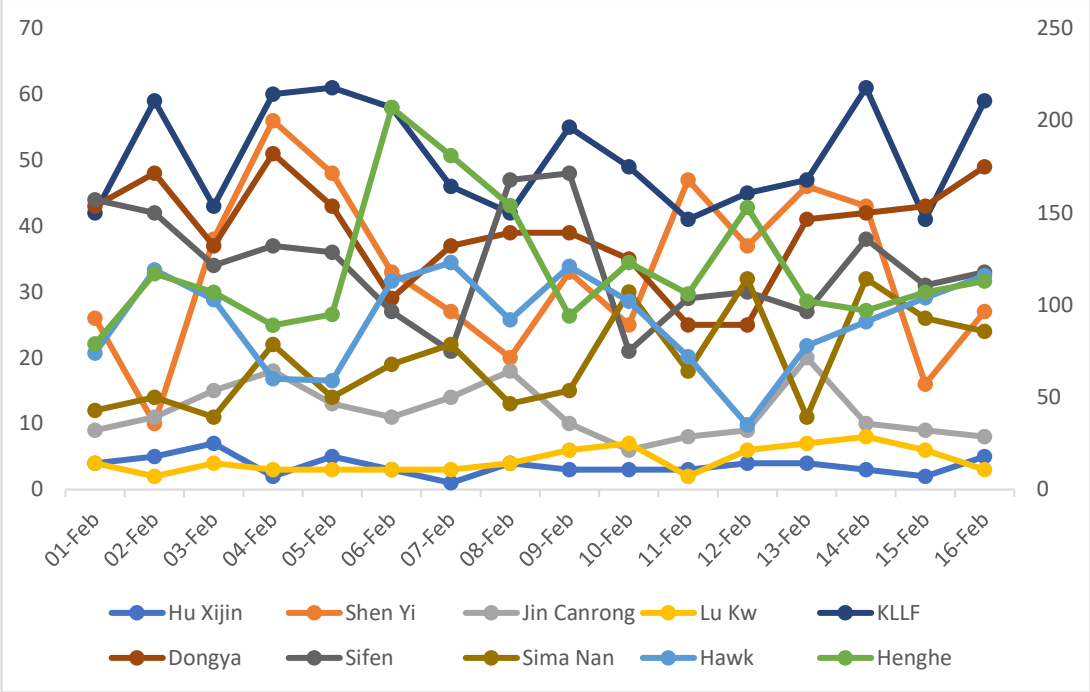


Figure 5.5: Daily Variation of Posts (Balloon)

Topic Focus and Transmission

Overall, China's foreign policies and its involvement in global affairs is the most frequently engaged meta theme by popular propagandists, followed by China's domestic affairs. No substantial gap exists between each theme, as the least frequently engaged one ("local affairs") is only 6% less than the most frequently engaged one. However, on the individual level, the preference over difference topics appears more disproportionate. Typically, an actor would prioritize at most two topics in their discussions. Most actors (four) prioritize China's foreign policy and international affairs among all topics. DY stands out as an exception who prioritizes "local" affairs over the more "political" topics. In other words, his style inclines to sociological propaganda due to his focus on apolitical issues. Nevertheless, this does not suggest the he is less "propagandistic" than the others, as the discussion of everyday, mundane

issues holds no less importance than those "serious" politics in total propaganda (Ellul 1965: 17; Edelstein 1997: 4).

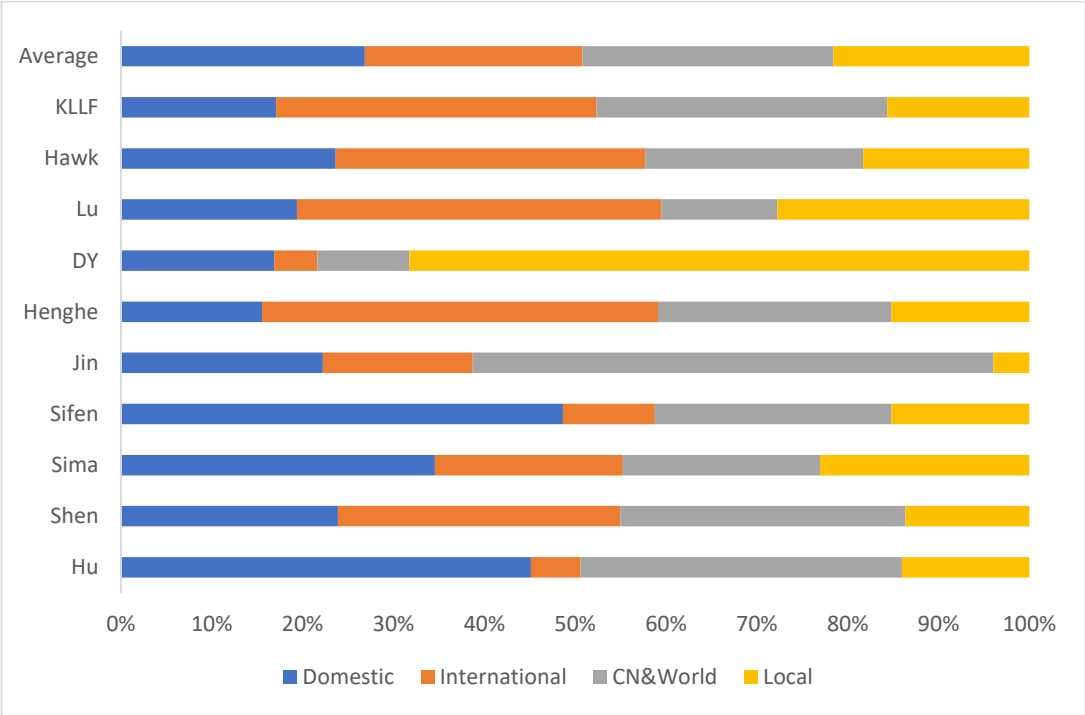


Figure 5.6: Meta Themes

I conceptualize popular propagandists as an intermediary level between the official and the grassroots levels. As the transmission belt, they can function in different ways, either by highlighting more official messages, engaging with each other or reflecting more public opinions. As revealed by the transmission code, the majority of posts serve the "bottom-up" functions, nearly doubling that of "top down" and "horizontal" ones. Preference and activeness in adopting a particular transmission vary between different actors as shown in Figure 7a). When it comes to specific political events, the Pelosi case has the highest top-down transmission rate, more than twice of the rest two cases. This finding further attests to the case's propaganda style going into the direction of political propaganda with a closer adherence to the official line. The Covid

and lockdown case displays the highest proportion of bottom-up and horizontal transmission functions, indicating. I tentatively argue that such liveliness of debates and communication openness renders the case resemble more to new propaganda. Transmission functions are inactive in the Wander Ballon case compared with the other two cases.

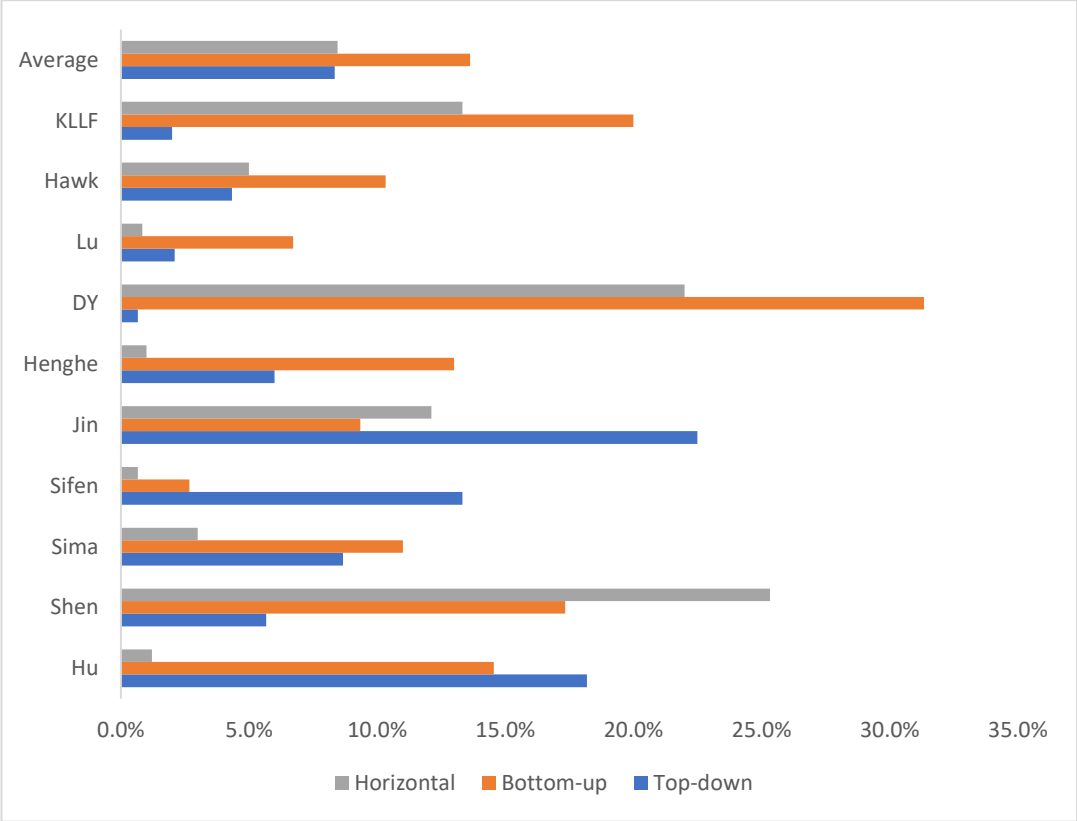


Figure 5.7a): Transmission Function (by each actor)

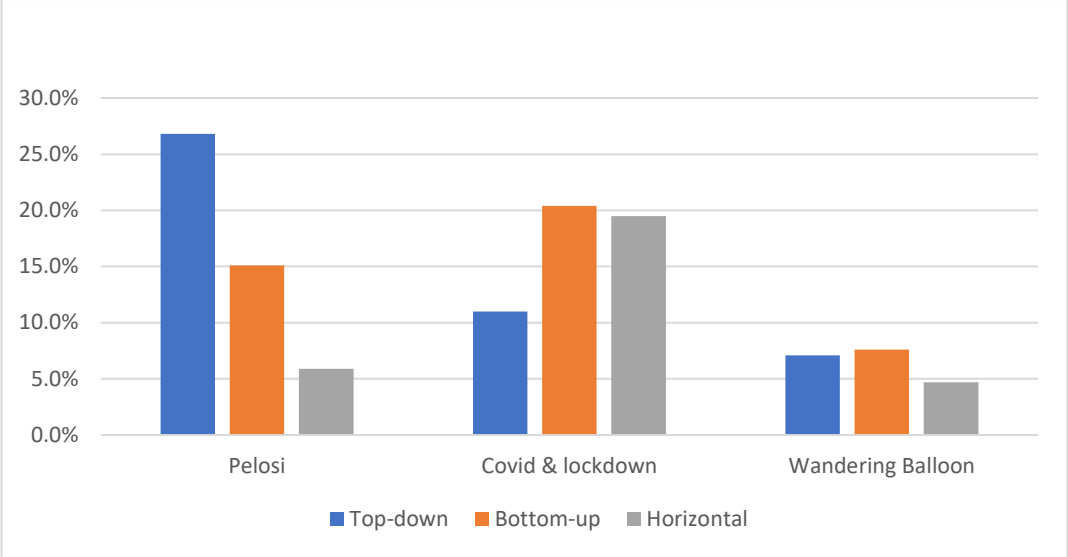


Figure 5.7b): Transmission Function (by each case)

The last but by no means least important factor in popular propagandists' posting habits is how much attention they gave to a specific issue. As the data of each case was collected over a certain period, not all the posts are necessarily relevant to the case under examination. The level of engagement by popular propagandists on each case reveals what is the actual level of activeness and willingness for each actor to engage with a specific issue. It turns out that the Pelosi case received most discussions by popular propagandists, as all but two actors have devoted around half of their sampled posts to this issue. In contrast, the anti-lockdown protest was barely discussed – only three actors had at least 10% of sampled posts dedicated to this issue. During the same period, the most salient topic discussed by most communicator was Covid management, which was the background of the protest. The balloon case received substantially lower level of engagement than the Pelosi visit and the Covid management. This finding, in conjunction with the overall posting frequency, once again reveals the highly "political" nature of the Pelosi case. It further suggests that

the eventfulness of this case brought most changes to the everydayness of popular propagandists' communications and dominated their discussion agenda.

Without data suggesting the actual viewings of a post, the number of "likes" can indicate how well a message is received by the audience. The Pelosi case remains the most popular case judging from the average number of "likes" it received, while the balloon case received more than 10 times less of "likes" compared with the other two cases. The findings from the reception side are in line with those from the production side, as the public showed great interest in the issue that received most attention from popular propagandists. Huge gap exists within the group of actors in terms of their popularity. The most "liked" actor (Hu Xijin) is more than 15 times higher than the least liked one (Lu Kw). Such differences can hardly be explained either by the posting habits or the number of fans. For example, though both posting in short length, DY received four times more likes than Hawk. Having more followers than Henghe, Lu Kw nevertheless received four times less likes. These points regarding popular propagandists' popularity will be further discussed in the following chapters.

To sum up, popular propagandists on Weibo has shown varying posting habits. Substantial individual differences exist in terms of communication activeness, topic focuses, transmission functions and popularity. Moreover, each political event receives varying levels of engagement from popular propagandists, and each actor displays different degrees of willingness to engage with a certain issue. Overall, judging from posting habits, the Pelosi case has a greater indication of political and agitational propaganda, by eliciting the highest attention and greatest communication activeness, and featuring highest top-down transmission. The Covid and lockdown case goes more into the direction of new propaganda due to the suggested liveliness

and openness of debates. The Ballon case receives less attention from popular propagandists compared with the other two cases.

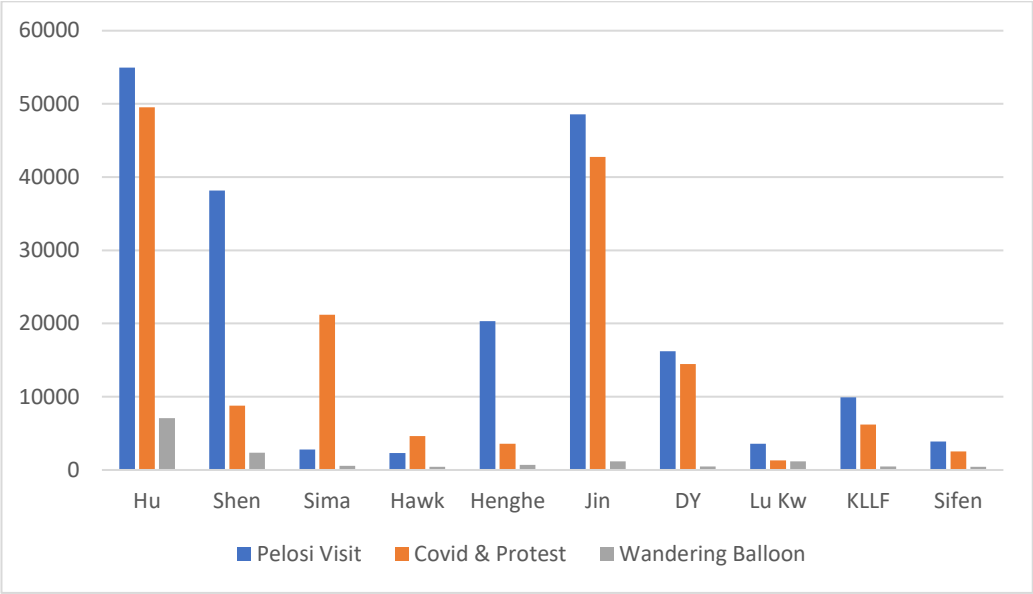


Figure 5.8: Popularity of Popular Propagandists

	Pelosi	Protest	Covid & Protest	Balloon
Hu Xijin	58	7	85	33
Shen Yi	60	13	69	30
KLLF	46	0	13	12
DY	23	0	32	2
Lu KW	17	1	15	6
Sima Nan	45	8	39	9
Sifen	52	12	33	32
Jin Canrong	67	4	19	18
Hawk	47	10	51	3
Henghe	59	0	46	19
Average	47	6	40	16

Table 5.1: Level of Engagement of Different Political Events (%)

Propagating Nationalism: Everydayness and Eventfulness

This section presents the rations of propaganda tactics and nationalism themes of each actor and case (See Figure 9 and 10, Table 2 and 3). The first line presents the results calculated from all sampled posts, and the second line shows those of case-specific posts. In order to investigate to the everydayness and eventfulness angles of propaganda, I further present the variation scores for propaganda tactics and nationalism themes respectively by calculating the differences of adoption rates between general and case-specific posts, the results of which are summarized in Table 4 to Table 9. This reveals to what extent a political changes popular propagandists' communication activities.

	Prescribing	**Expressing opinion**	**Emotional expression**	**Pro-stability**	**Informing**	**Interactive communication**	**Reposting official source**	**Neologism**	**other**
Pelosi visit	5.9	54.9	11.7	4.3	64.2	11.9	3.4	12.3	1.6
	7.3	61.7	12.4	5.8	64.8	9.2	4.7	15.7	0.4
Covid & protest	4.2	44.7	11.3	3.1	65.8	10.3	14.1	5.2	0.3
	6.1	56.4	7.5	5.5	61.1	11.7	2.1	5.8	0
Wandering Balloon	2.7	39.5	5.6	2.4	70.9	8.9	1.4	6.9	3.8
	2.0	42.8	2.6	2.6	74.4	5.6	0.2	13.7	0
All posts	4.3	46.4	9.5	3.3	67.0	10.4	6.3	8.1	1.9

Table 5.2: Average Adoption of Propaganda Tactics (%)

	Anti-foreign	**Cohesion**	**National Pride**	**Statism**	**Denouncing traitor**	**Idealizing**	**belligerence**	**Critical nationalism**	**None**	**Other**
Pelosi visit	20.1	5.9	5.8	7.0	4.2	1.8	3.0	3.0	54.8	1.9
	27.9	8.8	7.4	7.2	4.8	1.2	5.5	3.0	42.1	1.6
Covid & protest	6.0	2.6	5.0	6.1	4.6	1.2	0.0	3.2	71.6	0.8
	3.2	3.6	2.6	4.6	8.6	0.7	0.0	9.2	72.5	0.1
Wandering Balloon	16.5	1.6	6.8	4.5	2.3	0.9	1.1	1.1	70.8	0.6
	33.5	0.5	7.2	0.5	4.0	0.0	0.5	2.0	58.9	0.5
Average	14.7	4.5	5.5	5.9	4.9	1.2	1.9	3.9	62.4	1.0
	21.5	4.3	5.7	4.1	5.8	0.6	2.0	4.7	57.8	0.7

Table 5.3: Average Expression of Nationalism Themes (%)

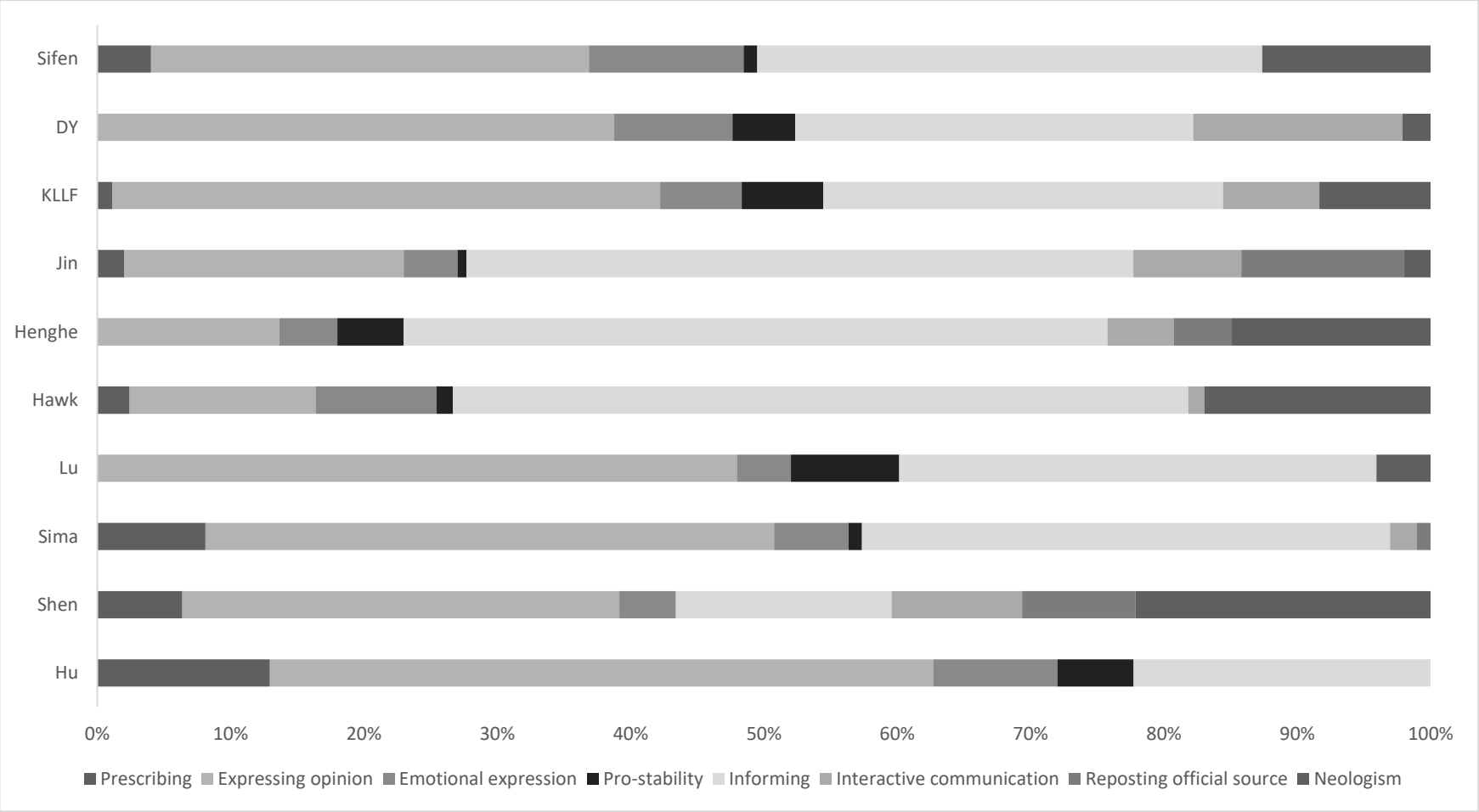


Figure 5.9a): Propaganda Profile (Pelosi visit)

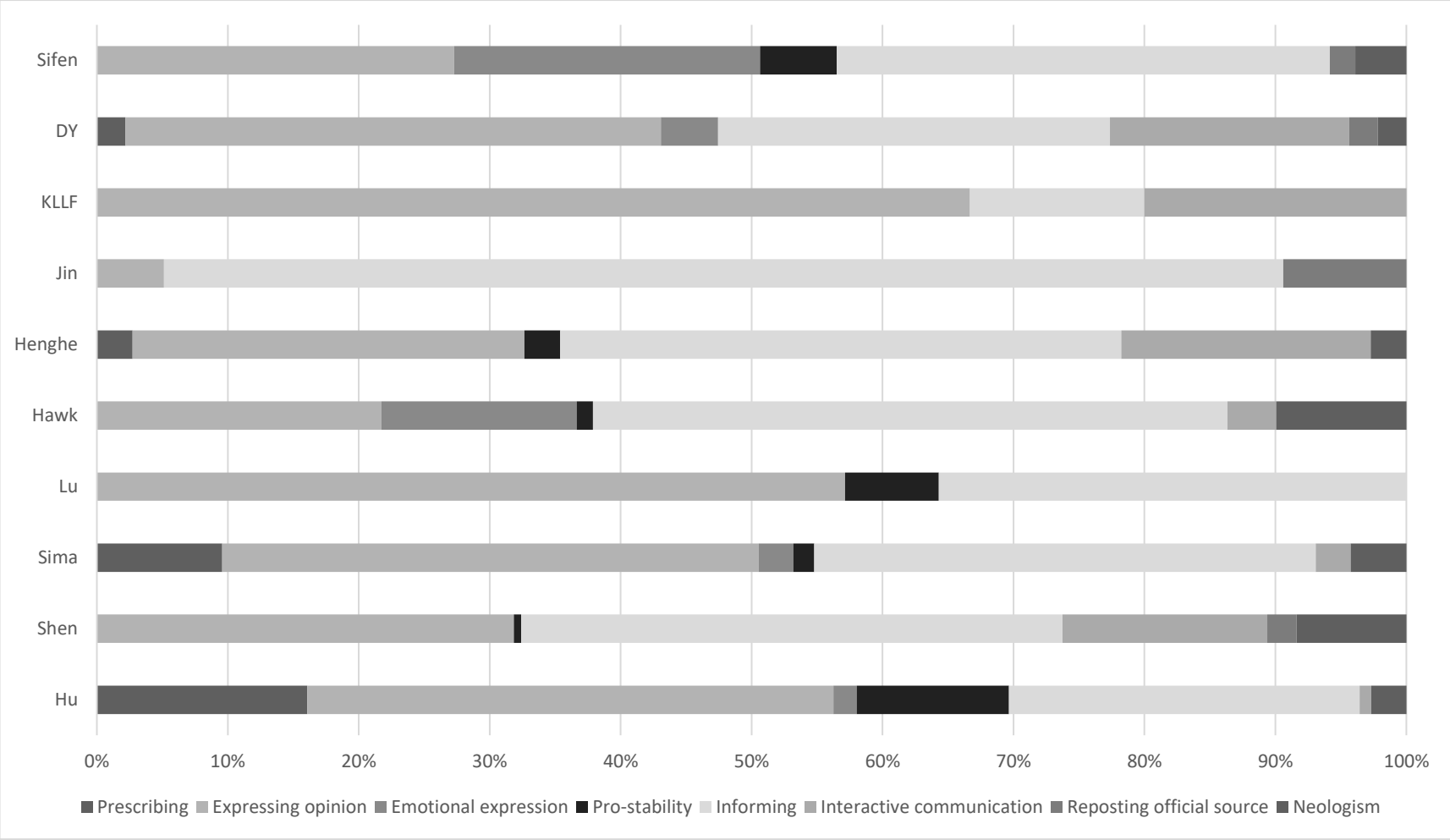


Figure 5.9b): Propaganda Profile (Covid & protest)

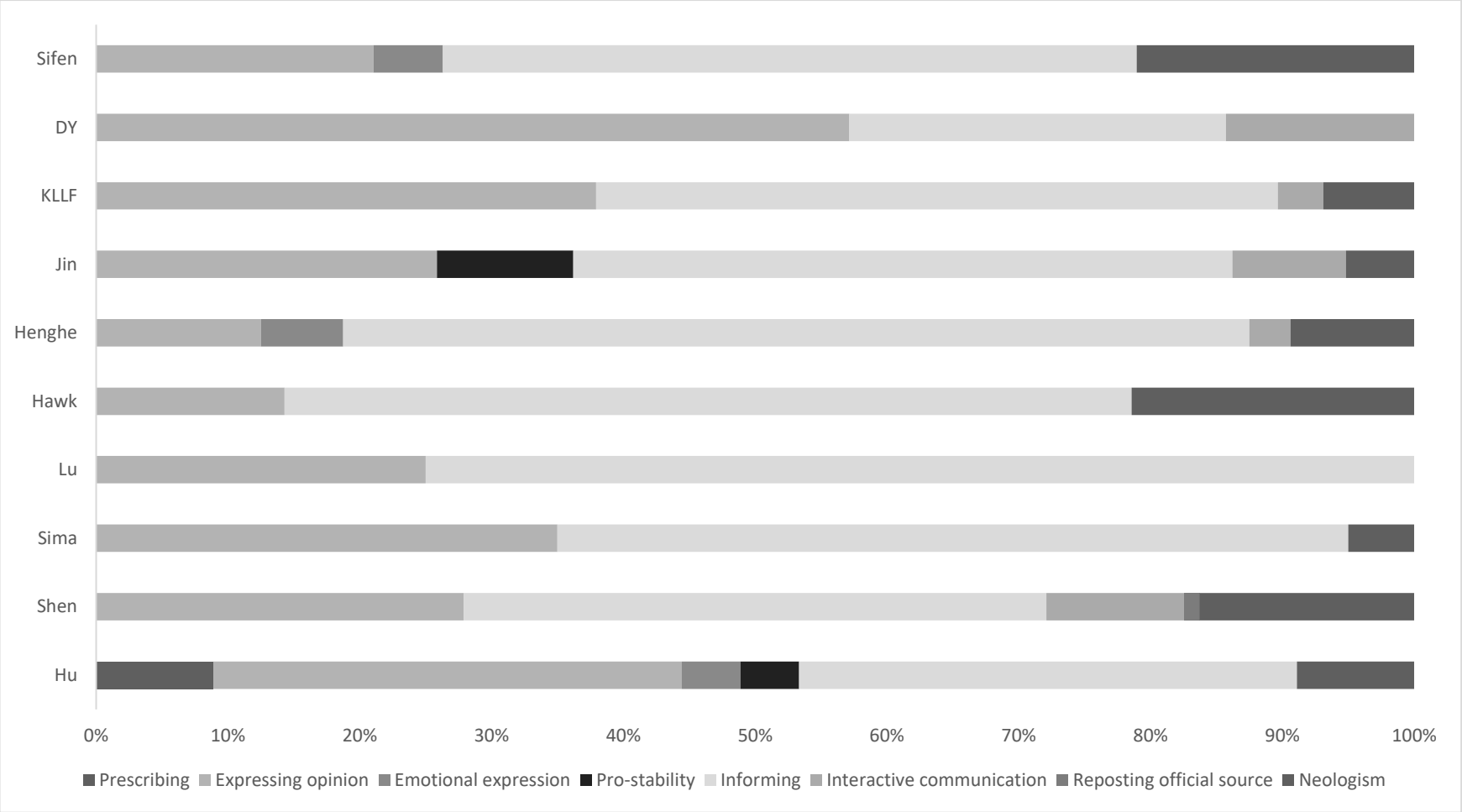


Figure 5.9c): Propaganda Profile (The Ballon case)

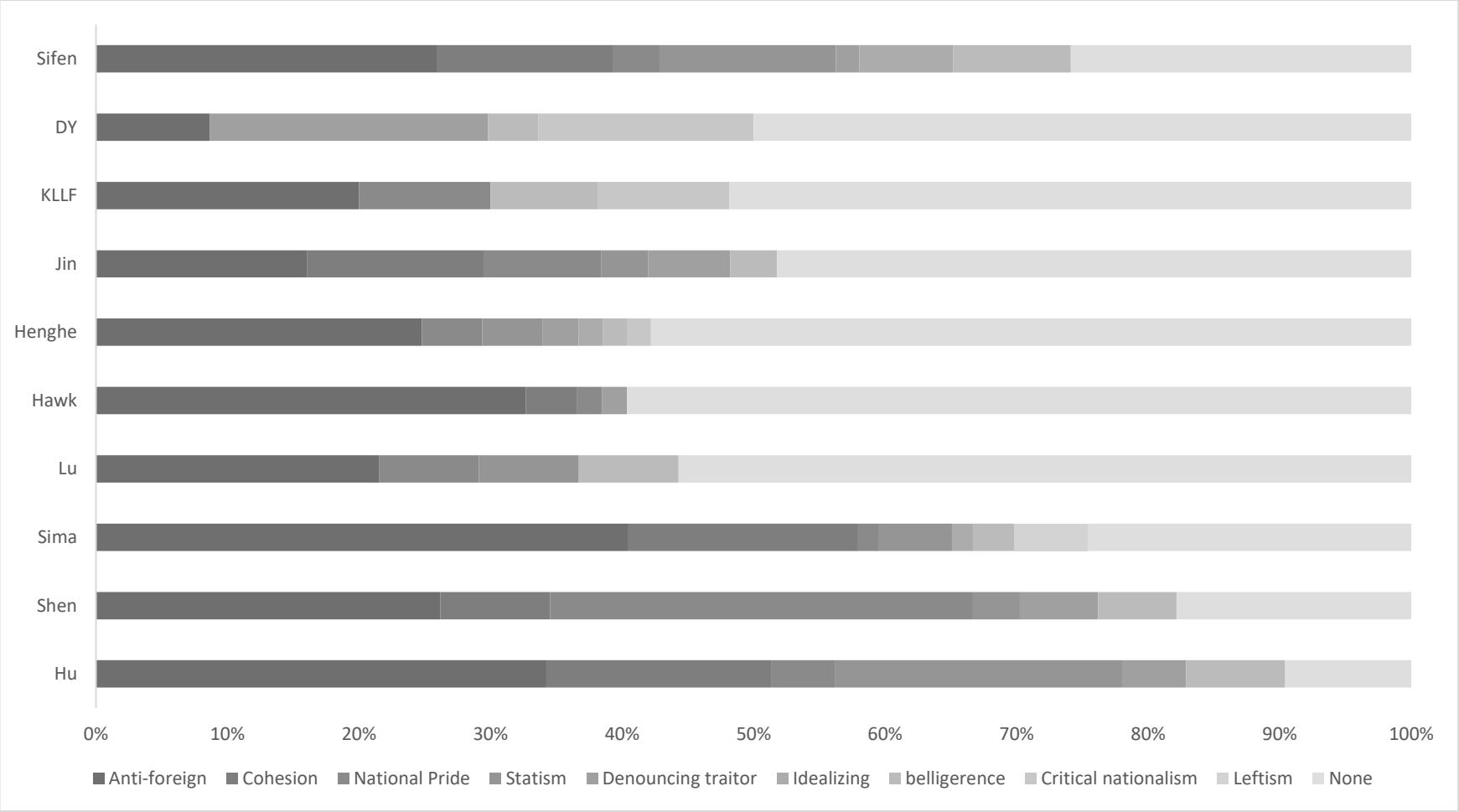


Figure 5.10a): Nationalist Themes (Pelosi case)

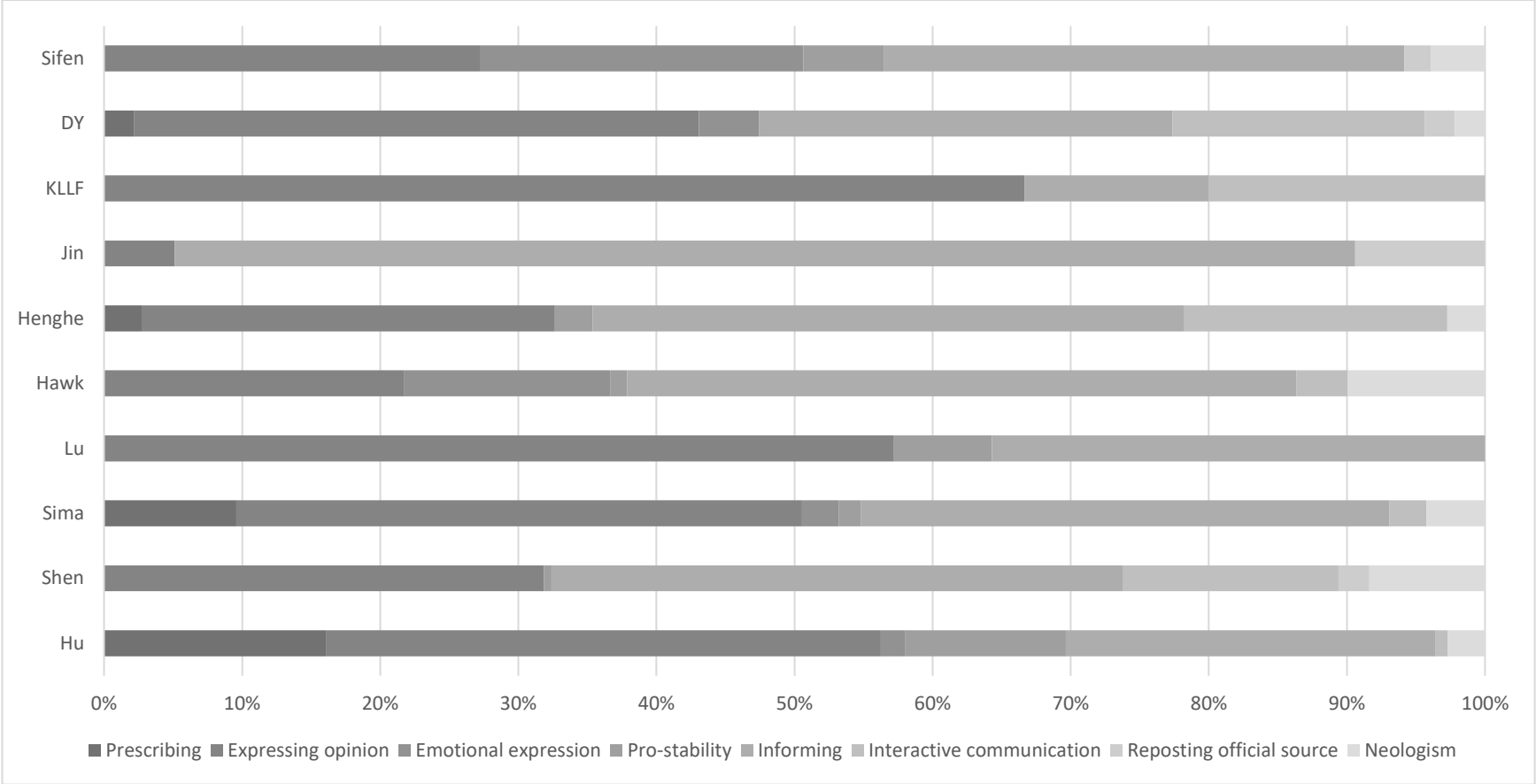


Figure 5.10b): Nationalist Themes (Covid & protest)

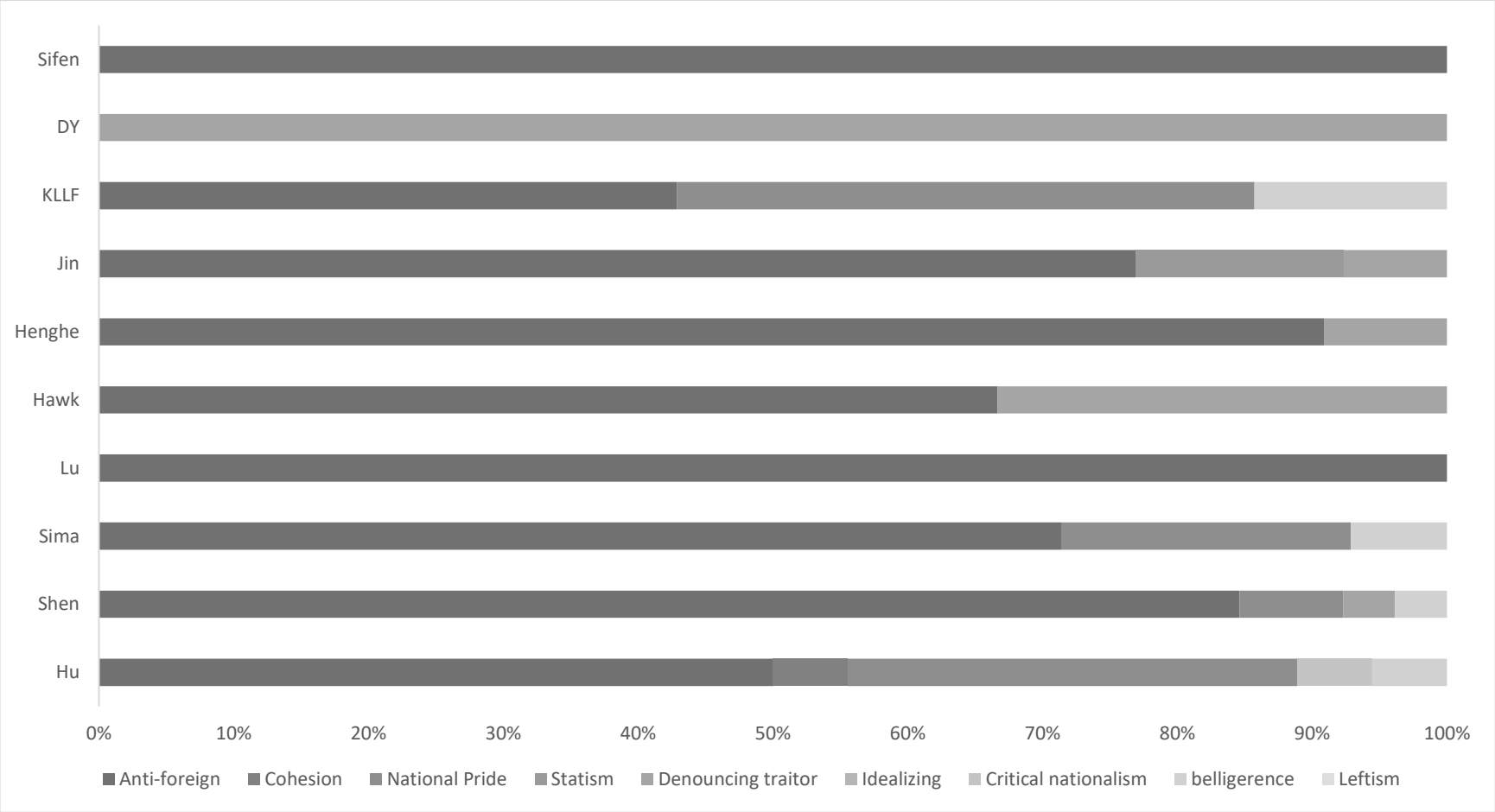


Figure 5.10c): Nationalism Theme (The Balloon case)

Propaganda Profile

"Informing" and "expressing opinion" are the two most frequently and widely used propaganda tactics, regardless of case-specific or general posts. This indicates that as a whole, popular propagandists' narrative style is similar to "rational propaganda", featuring details combined with personal opinions (Ellul 1965: 86; Zhang & Cameron 2004). The Pelosi case has the highest proportion of "expressing opinions". While the balloon case has the least active "expressing opinions", it boasts the highest information richness. The preference over other tactics is less obvious on the collective level, marked by their relatively low adoption rate. Neologism, the use of popular catchphrase in propaganda messages is a key feature of the Pelosi case and Balloon episode but appears less frequently in the Covid and anti-lockdown protest case. This suggests that the former two cases, in relevance to China's foreign policies, generate more synergies between politics and popular cultures, and showing a stronger indication of new propaganda. "Emotional expression" is also a key feature of the Pelosi case, while the Covid and protest case elicits the highest usage of "interactive communication". In relation to propaganda theories, these findings are in line with those presented in the previous section, aligning the Pelosi case with political and agitational propaganda, and the Covid case with new propaganda. On the individual level, both "informing" and "expressing opinion" remain the most popular tactics as both appear in all actors' propaganda profile and have accounted for at least one fifth of one's adopted tactics. The adoption rate of other tactics varies between different actors. Certain tactics, such as prescribing, interactive communication and reposting official source, are completely absent from certain actors' propaganda profile.

When commenting on a particular political event, popular propagandists do not substantially change their preferences over most frequently used propaganda tactics in their daily communication. Sima Nan and Lu Kw are most likely to change their preference, and the balloon case leads to most actors to make changes (six), followed by the Pelosi case (four) and Covid case (three). However, the three most frequently used tactics by each actor seldom change, despite occasional change in their ranking. For example, when commenting on the Pelosi case, Hawk and Henghe increased the use of "neologism" over "expressing opinion", and Sifen increased the use of "neologism" over "emotional expression". Sima Nan replaced "interactive communication" with "neologism" as the thirdly most favoured tactics when commenting on the balloon episode. In other words, popular propagandists' propaganda profile as demonstrated by their preferred tactics do not change substantially between "eventfulness" and "everydayness".

Though commenting on political events does not substantially change one's preference over propaganda tactics, it can still result in variation of a specific tactic's adoption rate. Most actors display a consistent pattern in the in/decrease of a specific tactic in line with the overall trend in the Pelosi and the Covid and protest case. Regarding the Pelosi case, seven out of the eight coded tactics' adoption rates increase on case-specific posts. Excluding the two least active communicators on the case (Lu Kewen and DY), the adoption of emotional expression, pro-stability and interactive communication slightly decreases across all case-specific posts. Expressing opinions, informing and neologism see the most exponential rise, suggesting higher proportion of original perspective, information richness, and neologist practices in Pelosi-related posts. The Covid and protest case displays a different picture. After excluding the

inactive communicators' influence, emotional expression and informing show a noticeable drop in their usage, while expressing opinion increases sharply. This finding suggests a calm discussion environment on this event with more original opinions, which are not necessarily backed by concrete evidence. When it comes to the Balloon case, different popular propagandists appear far less consistent in the individual variation propaganda tactics adoption, with the exception of interactive communication (decrease) and neologism (increase). Excluding the influence of four inactive communicators, expressing opinion and neologism display the most substantial increase in balloon-related posts, while emotional expression records a noticeable drop. These finding suggests that popular propagandists appear calmer, more likely to share personal views and adopt neologist practices when commenting on this event.

Nationalism Themes

Despite carrying the label of "nationalistic" online key opinion leader, popular propagandists have issued more non-nationalistic posts than nationalistic ones. "Anti-foreign" stands out as the most prominent nationalism theme in all posts, which is also the defining features of the Pelosi and the Balloon case. This indicates that, as long as foreign elements are involved, "anti-foreign" nationalism will become the most salient themes in popular propagandists' nationalist narratives. The other nationalism themes appear far less frequently. The density and diversity of nationalism themes vary between different actors and cases. When commenting on specific cases, roughly four types of nationalism on average are observed in each actor. The nationalism profile of some actors is much more diversified than others. The Pelosi case elicits not only the highest proportion but also the most varied nationalism profile. The Covid and protest

case contains the least proportion of nationalistic posts, while the balloon case has the least category of nationalism themes. Though both Pelosi and balloon case feature high proportion of "anti-foreign" nationalism, the former also contains a noticeable presence of "cohesion" and "statism" messages. "Critical nationalism" and "denouncing traitor" have a larger presence than other themes in the Covid and protest case. On the individual level, the observed actors show little convergence in their expressed nationalism themes. "Anti-foreign" remains the most popular nationalism themes for most communicators. This finding is in line with previous literature that argues for xenophobia as one of the most crucial cores of Chinese nationalism (Wu 2014: 230; Mattingly & Yao 2020). It is worthwhile to mention that "leftism", a theme coded for the lingering Maoism in China appeared as egalitarianism and anti-elitism (Blanchette 2019: 67, 125), only appears in Sima Nan's posts. Though some literatures have argued for a revival of (neo)Maoism on the Chinese Internet and at grassroots level (Brown & Van Nieuwenhuizen 2019; Economy 2019), the data collected for this thesis does not support such argument.

In order to investigate whether popular propagandists become more or less nationalistic when discussing a certain case, I investigate the differences between all sampled posts and case-specific ones in the ratio of non-nationalistic posts and those of specific nationalism themes (See Table 6, 8 and 10). On the collective level, popular propagandists became more nationalistic when discussing the Pelosi case and the Balloon case, as revealed by the decrease in non-nationalistic posts' proportion (Table 3). The increase in nationalist expressions in the Pelosi case is driven by different types of themes, while "anti-foreign" is the only prominent theme in the Balloon case. In contrast, discussing the Covid and protest case led to a reduction in nationalist

expressions. A consistent, cross-actor increase in nationalistic posts is observed in the Pelosi case. Though to a less degree, the Ballon case also sees an overwhelmingly rise in nationalist expressions among most actors. Sifen is the only actors who receives a negative score due to his substantial reduction of "statism" and "national pride" messages. When it comes to the Covid and protest case, only half of the popular propagandists receive a positive score, most of which are a marginal increase. Jin Canrong displays the most drastic change driven by a substantial drop of "statism" and "national pride" messages. To sum up, the "eventfulness" of the Pelosi case and the ballon case brings substantial increase of nationalist expressions from popular propagandists. In contrast, the Covid and protest case reduces the density of nationalist messages. This finding suggests that the involvement of foreign elements, especially a perceived foreign threat, triggers more nationalist expressions (Koschut et al., 2017: 48). In relation to propaganda, the low proportion of nationalist messages in the Covid and protest case indicate greater likelihood of integration propaganda, while the heightened nationalist sentiments in the other two cases suggest closer resemblance to political and agitation propaganda, which is in line with the findings presented in the previous section.

Next, the variation of specific nationalism themes in each case is examined. The Pelosi case witnesses a noticeable increase in "anti-foreign", "cohesion", "national pride" and "belligerence" types of nationalism on both collective and individual levels. In other words, most popular propagandists become more critical of foreign actors, call for more unity among Chinese people, express a greater sense of national pride and appear more aggressive when commenting on this event. The involvement of Taiwan factor and its implications of China's sovereignty and territory integrity partly explains

their belligerent attitudes (Hughes 2013: 13-15; Zhou 2019). With non-active commentators excluded, “statism”, “critical nationalism” and “denouncing traitor” experience the most dramatic rise in the Covid and protest case, suggesting a greater likelihood for popular propagandists to express reflexive and critical views, while simultaneously supporting regime and suppressing dissents.

The increase of statism messages is less consistent across all actors compared with the other. “Anti-foreign” and “national pride” experience a substantial drop, most likely due to the issue’s nature as a domestic event. Previous literatures have drawn different conclusions regarding China’s inward nationalism, with some observing more pro-regime voices while some denoting more critical ones (Callahan 2006: 186). Thus, the increase in “critical nationalism” and “denouncing traitor” messages is not contradictory, but instead suggests the coexistence of different views. Regarding the balloon case, “anti-foreign” displays the most drastic and consistent increase among all nationalism themes. The overall drop of statism messages is mainly contributed by a single actor (Sifen).

Though “national pride” also displays a noticeable increase overall, its variation trend is less consistent across active communicators. These findings indicate that the balloon case elicits increased criticisms of foreign actors but reduces pro-regimes messages from popular propagandists. Though a greater sense of national pride is observed on the collective level, individual communicators’ emphasis on this message varies. The increase in anti-foreign messages and the reduction in statism messages is arguably a tactic of distraction (Brady 2009) or a blame shifting on the US (Verma 2020) to lead the public’s attention away from the unpleasant inference that China is responsible for the balloon’s intrusion.

	Prescribing	Expressing opinion	Emotional Expression	Pro-stability	Informing	Interactive communication	Reposting official actors	Neologism	Other
Hu Xijin	+2	+4	+3	-6	+3	N/A	N/A	-2	N/A
Shen Yi	+4	+12	+4	-4	+1	+5	+8	+11	-2
Sima Nan	+6	+1	-2	0	+11	-2	+1	-1	0
Lu KW	-1	+17	+1	+9	-5	N/A	N/A	+3	N/A
Hawk	+1	-3	-2	0	+8	+1	N/A	+2	-7
Henghe	N/A	+2	+1	+3	0	-2	+3	+7	N/A
Jin Canrong	+1	-4	-3	0	+10	+1	+5	-1	N/A
KLLF	+1	+13	+6	+5	-3	-6	N/A	+5	N/A
Dongya	N/A	+13	+13	+7	-26	-23	-3	0	+3
Sifen	0	+17	-14	+1	+7	-1	-1	+10	-6
Summary	15 (16)	72 (42)	7 (-7)	15 (-1)	6 (37)	-27 (-4)	13 (16)	34 (31)	-12 (9)

Table 5.4: Differences in Propaganda Tactics (Pelosi) (%)

	Anti-foreign	**Cohesion**	**National Pride**	**Statism**	**Denouncing traitor**	**Idealizing**	**belligerence**	**Critical nationalism**	**Leftism**	**Non-Nationalistic**	**Other**
Hu Xijin	+15	+8	+1	+9	+3	-2	+5	-13	N/A	-5	+5
Shen Yi	-6	+3	+10	-1	+2	N/A	+2	-1	N/A	-7	+2
Sima Nan	+20	+9	+1	+3	-5	-4	+2	-4	-7	-8	-2
Lu KW	+12	N/A	+4	+1	N/A	N/A	+5	-2	N/A	-44	N/A
Hawk	+8	-1	+1	N/A	-3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	-4
Henghe	+6	N/A	+2	+2	-2	+1	+1	+1	N/A	-7	-1
Jin Canrong	-2	+5	+1	-3	+3	-1	0	N/A	N/A	-2	-3
KLLF	+10	N/A	-3	-5	-1	-1	+5	+6	N/A	-11	N/A
Dongya	+7	N/A	N/A	N/A	+11	N/A	+3	+13	N/A	-29	N/A
Sifen	+8	+5	-1	-4	-2	+1	+2	N/A	N/A	-5	N/A
Summary	78 (59)	29	16 (12)	2 (1)	6 (-5)	-0.06	25 (17)	0 (-11)	-7	-118 (-45)	-3

Table 5.5: Differences in Nationalist Themes (Pelosi) (%)

	Prescribing	**Expressing opinion**	**Emotional Expression**	**Pro-stability**	**Informing**	**Interactive communication**	**Reposting official actors**	**Neologism**	**Other**
Hu Xijin	+4	+4	-1	+4	+2	-1	N/A	+1	N/A
Shen Yi	N/A	+11	N/A	0	+5	+8	-1	+5	-2
Sima Nan	+11	+9	-9	+2	-15	+2	N/A	+5	N/A
Lu KW	N/A	+28	N/A	+9	-18	N/A	N/A	-4	N/A
Hawk	N/A	+2	+10	+1	+11	-2	-1	+1	-12
Henghe	+2	+7	N/A	+2	-5	+14	-1	-2	N/A
Jin Canrong	N/A	-17	-16	N/A	+29	-1	-21	-4	N/A
KLLF	N/A	+44	-7	N/A	-41	+1	-1	-3	-4
Dongya	+2	+6	-5	N/A	+4	-7	+2	+2	N/A
Sifen	N/A	+23	-10	+6	-19	N/A	+2	+5	N/A
Summary	18	117 (62)	-38 (-15)	24 (15)	-47 (-17)	14	-21 (10)	6 (17)	-18 (-14)

Table 5.6: Differences in Propaganda Tactics (Covid & protest) (%)

	Anti-foreign	**Cohesion**	**National Pride**	**Statism**	**Denouncing traitor**	**Idealizing**	**Critical nationalism**	**Leftism**	**Non-Nationalistic**	**Other**	**Summary**
Hu Xijin	0	+3	-1	+1	0	-1	+2	N/A	-2	N/A	4
Shen Yi	-5	+1	+1	-1	+1	N/A	-1	N/A	+3	N/A	-4
Sima Nan	-5	+3	-5	+3	+4	N/A	+1	0	+7	-1	0
Lu KW	-1	N/A	+6	N/A	-1	N/A	+16	N/A	-18	N/A	20
Hawk	-2	N/A	+1	0	+7	N/A	+3	N/A	-14	-1	8
Henghe	0	N/A	+2	N/A	+1	N/A	+1	N/A	-2	N/A	4
Jin Canrong	-4	N/A	-12	-10	+5	N/A	N/A	N/A	+47	N/A	-21
KLLF	-6	N/A	-8	N/A	N/A	N/A	+34	N/A	-17	N/A	20
Dongya	-1	N/A	N/A	N/A	-1	N/A	+3	N/A	-1	N/A	0
Sifen	-4	+3	-8	-8	+24	-4	N/A	-1	+6	-3	-1
Summary [8]	-17 (-28)	10	-10 (-24)	-5 (15)	36 (40)	-5	9 (59)	-1	**-3** (9)	-5	

Table 5.7: Differences in Nationalist Themes (Covid & protest) (%)

[8] Results in brackets exclude the data from inactive communicators, who pay less than 10% of their posts to discussing a specific event. The same rule applies to Table 9 and 10.

	Prescribing	Expressing opinion	Emotional expression	Pro-stability	Informing	Interactive communication	Reposting official source	Neologism	other
Hu Xijin	1	-8	1	0	21	N/A	-3	11	N/A
Shen Yi	N/A	8	-1	N/A	5	-2	-2	7	N/A
Sima Nan	-7	-13	-2	-1	23	-16	N/A	4	N/A
Lu Kw	N/A	-10	-1	N/A	10	-1	N/A	-4	-9
Hawk	N/A	7	-2	-1	-13	-1	N/A	10	-16
Henghe	N/A	2	5	N/A	2	-3	N/A	5	-1
Jin Canrong	-1	-3	-1	6	0	1	-1	4	-1
KLLF	N/A	9	-1	-1	1	-3	N/A	8	-9
DY	N/A	23	-12	N/A	-4	-7	-4	N/A	N/A
Sifen	N/A	18	-16	N/A	-10	N/A	-1	23	-2
Summary	-7 (0)	33 (26)	-30 (-13)	3 (5)	35 (13)	-32 (-7)	-11 (-7)	68 (35)	-38 (-11)

Table 5.8: Differences in Propaganda Tactics (Balloon) (%)

	Anti-foreign	Cohesion	National Pride	Statism	Denouncing traitor	Idealizing	Critical nationalism	belligerence	Leftism	Other	None	Variation Score
Hu	21	-11	4	-9	-2	-5	-2	0	N/A	-3	-6	0
Shen	15	N/A	2	-1	1	N/A	N/A	1	N/A	N/A	-14	31
Sima	49	N/A	18	-8	-5	-1	N/A	7	-13	N/A	-31	78
Lu	22	N/A	-4	N/A	N/A	N/A	-3	N/A	N/A	N/A	-15	30
Hawk	13	N/A	-2	-1	9	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	-19	38
Henghe	24	N/A	-7	N/A	2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	-18	37
Jin	0	N/A	-1	2	2	N/A	N/A	-2	N/A	-1	-1	1
KLLF	7	N/A	6	-1	N/A	N/A	N/A	3	N/A	4	-18	37
DY	-1	N/A	-3	N/A	11	N/A	-1	N/A	N/A	N/A	-8	13
Sifen	22	N/A	-9	-22	-1	-3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	11	-25
Summary	171 (137)	-11	4 (14)	-39 (-41)	17 (-5)	-9	-6 (-2)	8 (10)	-13	-1 (1)	-118 (-76)	

Table 5.9: Differences in Nationalist Themes (Balloon) (%)

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the communication activities of popular propagandists, with particular attention paid to propaganda tactics and nationalism. Overall, "informing" and "expressing opinion" are the most frequently used propaganda tactics. The preference over the two tactics can be a strategic choice to gain more views and popularity, as previous literature about Weibo's key opinion leaders point out that original perspectives and information richness are key factors to attract followers (Chen & Fu 2016). Over 60% of the sampled posts are non-nationalistic, a finding partially confirms Zhang and his colleagues' findings that nationalism voices do not dominate Weibo's public discussions (Zhang et al., 2018). However, "anti-foreign" sentiment, rather than "critical nationalism", "national pride" or "cohesion", turns out to be the most salient nationalism themes among all (See for example, Zhang 2021; Cairns & Carlson 2016 for alternative findings). The choice of popular propagandists as research objects and the selection of political events may lead to such differences. The four meta-themes engaged are evenly distributed, with "China in international affairs" receiving the most attention. The emphasis on this particular theme is in line with China's ascending global status and more proactive foreign policies, which have led to more heated discussions at home (Scobell & Harold 2013; Zhao 2021: 157). Still, one fifth of popular propagandists' posts do not belong to the realm of "formal" politics. In terms of the transmission functions, the "bottom-up" type of transmission holds a substantially higher proportion than the "top-down" or "horizontal" types, suggesting a greater inclination of the propaganda messages to reflect public opinions rather than the official lines or peer perspectives. Popular propagandists' willingness to engage with "trivial" and apolitical issues, and their

frequence in reaching out to the grassroots distinguish them from mainstream and official media, who have stricter editorial requirement and ideological commitment (Zou 2023: 211).

Rather than inclining towards a specific type of propaganda, the overall propaganda and nationalism profiles of popular propagandists suggest the coexistence of various types of propaganda. The five most frequently adopted tactics are “informing”, “expressing opinions”, “interactive communication”, “emotional expression” and “neologism”, with “informing” and “expressing opinion” appear far more frequently than the rest. This finding suggests that most posts from popular propagandists come with a reasonable degree of sophistication. The presence of “emotional communication” in less than one in ten posts suggests that the overall tone of popular propagandists goes more into the direction of rational rather than irrational propaganda. Moreover, the unneglectable presence of “interactive communication” and “neologism” as important supplementary tactics also indicates a stronger inclination to “new propaganda” and “horizontal propaganda”, since both tactics generate more synergies between political communications and popular cultures, and encourage public participation in propaganda.

Apart from propaganda tactics, the ideational core of propaganda messages, reflected by its nationalism themes, also imply the inclinations towards different categories of propaganda. Among all posts, a total of six nationalism themes has a discernible presence whose proportions are ranked as follows: “anti-foreign sentiments”, “statism”, “national pride”, “denouncing traitors”, “cohesion” and “critical nationalism”. Drawing on theoretical inferences on differentiating patriotism from nationalism (Gries et al., 2011; Sinkkonen 2013), I tentatively divide them into two

groups which display contrasting orientations on the spectrum of new and old propaganda. “Anti-foreign sentiments”, “statism” and “denouncing traitor” are nationalism messages reflecting “old propaganda”, since they are concerned with the negative dimensions of nationalism that suppresses individual initiatives and provokes hatred against outsiders. “Cohesion”, “critical nationalism” and “national pride” belongs to “new propaganda” as they reflect the positive dimension of patriotism, emphasizing unity, self-empowerment, and reflections. Based on such premise, popular propagandists’ nationalist narratives display a stronger indication of old propaganda due to the dominance of “anti-foreign” type of nationalism. In other words, they are more interested in undermining the image of “other” rather than empowering “us” in their communication. Out of the three types of nationalism themes tilting more towards “new propaganda”, only “national pride” ranks higher than those entailing “old propaganda”. Cohesive messages and those of critical and reflexive nature, which have been given much emphasis in China’s “soft power” and digital activism (Edney 2015; Lin & Zhang 2018), only have minimal presence in popular propagandists’ communications.

Inter-case and Inter-actor Difference

The Pelosi case displays typical characteristics of political propaganda. This event dominates popular propagandists’ communication agenda in a given period. The overall rhetoric appears prescriptive, and the frequent appearance of “top-down” transmission suggests the prevalence of official messages. The case not only elicits most intensive nationalistic messages among the three cases, but also features the most diversified nationalism themes. Considering the high stakes involved in the Pelosi case including sovereignty, cross-strait and Sino-US relationships which occupy a central

position in Chinese nationalism (Gries et al., 2011; Hughes 2013: 1-20), its overtly political orientation does not come as a surprise. Interestingly, both agitation propaganda and integration propaganda seem to be in play, as popular propagandists both incite anti-foreign sentiments and call for support for the regime. Though the domination of prescriptive languages and hate-provoking anti-foreign nationalism resemble old propaganda, it simultaneously displays the characteristic of new propaganda reflected from the high adoption rate of neologism.

Primarily concerned with China's domestic issues, the propaganda styles of Covid and protest case differ sharply from the Pelosi case. The breakout of anti-lockdown protests received few attentions. Instead, most discussions were directed at China's Covid-19 pandemic management. The different weights assigned to the two issues suggest that the case goes more into the direction of sociological propaganda, as Covid-19 had been a "normalized" issue in China's public discussions at the time of this case. The overall tone is calm and matter of fact with few nationalist expressions, corresponding to the feature of integration propaganda. The case also displays contradicting signals on the dimension of old and new propaganda. Although its messages contain few references to popular cultures, the case nevertheless triggers the most active interactive communication and critical nationalism expressions among the three cases. Moreover, the high proportions of "bottom-up" and "horizontal" transmission suggest lively discussions. Compared with the other two cases, the Balloon case lies somewhere in between the political/sociological propaganda spectrum. Neither does it show a clear inclination towards either integration or agitation propaganda. Although the propagated messages are highly nationalistic, the diplomacy crisis receives less engagement, solicits less diversified propaganda and

nationalism profiles and triggers less active transmission functions than the other two cases. Similar to the Pelosi case, it displays a strong indication of new propaganda as reflected by the high adoption rate of "neologism" practices, notwithstanding the dominance of "anti-foreign" nationalism.

On top of the different natures between the three cases that elicit different responses, such variations can also be a result of popular propagandists' strategic choice and their individual competitiveness as a strategic communicator. The decision of whether and how to engage a political event is a careful balancing act between clickbait and censorship. Like all we media practitioners, popular propagandists pursue online traffic. But unlike the largely apolitical, entertainment-oriented wanghong (Sullivan & Wang 2024), they predominantly focus on political events, the discussions of which come with greater sensitivities and uncertainties. Covering sensitive political events involving high stakes or issuing sensational perspectives returns with high clickbait but risks crossing the "red lines" set for the permissible boundary for online political discussions (Bamman et al., 2012; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015). Moreover, the individual competitiveness of popular propagandists varies, including one's information gathering and writing capacity, and familiarity with digital (sub)culture. For example, the two prolific communicators, Hu Xijin and Sima Nana, have had abundant experience in media industry. Shen Yi, who is particularly fond of adopting neologism, has long been known for his status as a wanghong professor. Similar to wanghong's self-branding efforts (Wang & Feng 2022), popular propagandists also construct their unique persona. For example, Sifen's adopts more "old propaganda" than the others to signal of his identity as a retired PLA soldier. Moreover, popular propagandists as an "occupation" parallels wanghong who have gone from

amateurism to professionalism (Han 2021). The operation of nationalistic online key opinion' Weibo accounts may be influenced by the companies or think tanks behind them (Zhang & Ma 2023: 909).

To sum up, this chapter presents the quantification of coding results of popular propagandists' communication activities, revealing relevant indicators including posting frequency, posting length, transmission, propaganda tactics and nationalism themes. It also reveals two different dimensions of "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of their propaganda by comparing case-specific and general posts. The overview of the data addresses the "what" question of popular propagandists' propagation of cyber nationalism. Overall, popular propagandists post original contents and prioritize "bottom-up" transmission functions by frequently reaching out to the grassroots and reflecting public opinions. They are particularly in favour of "informing" and "expressing opinion" propaganda tactics and the "anti-foreign" nationalism themes. However, substantial variations exist between different actors' communication profiles. The three political events receive varying levels of attention and displays different propaganda and nationalism profiles. Overall, political events concerning China's foreign policies are dominated by "anti-foreign sentiments" and generates more synergies with popular cultures than domestic events. The Pelosi event receives most attention and elicits the most diversified propaganda and nationalism profiles than the rest two cases.

Though these findings are illuminating in themselves, more details are needed to answer the question "How do popular propagandists communicated political events of different natures to the public"? A deep dive into the textual level of the data can answer the following questions arising from the coding results. To begin with, what

are the narrative patterns of propaganda tactics and nationalism messages and how are they expressed by different actors across different cases? Moreover, why and how do certain propaganda tactics and nationalism themes indicating different types of propaganda coexist in a case? Do they transform from one to another, compete against or work in conjunction with each other? Last but not least, what explains the inter-case and inter-actor variations in the propagation of cyber nationalism? The following three chapters will focus on the textual level of case-specific posts, describe and interpret the highlighted subcodes.

Chapter Six: Pelosi's Taiwan visit

Introduction

Background

Tensions were high in the Taiwan strait in the summer of 2022, with some international observers denoting it as the fourth Taiwan strait crisis (Twomey 2022). On 2 August, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, paid a two-day visit to the island, in a stance to show "the unequivocal statement that America stands with Taiwan" (Pelosi 2022). The significance of Pelosi's visit goes beyond the symbolic level, because the congress's stance is particularly important for ensuring US's defence of Taiwan in case of military confrontations with the PRC (Lee & Hulme 2022). Internationally, Pelosi's visit received mixed reactions. Many applauded her courage and the "Pelosi effect" encouraging waves of foreign delegations queuing up to visit Taiwan to show solidarity (Davidson 2022a). Critics blamed her "reckless" move in defiance of the concerns raised by the US military and President Biden (Smith 2022), which deepened the Sino-US rupture and increased cross-Strait tensions (Singleton 2022). The visit was met with the PRC's fury, which responded with large-scale military exercise, firing ballistic missiles and sending warships and airplanes off Taiwan's coastline. Apart from the military exercise, China either suspended or cancelled eight key dialogue and cooperations with the US, including military dialogues, counternarcotics cooperation and climate change (Ni 2022). Blanchett and his colleagues took a more cautious tone, signalling a new status quo in Sino-US-Taiwan's triangle relationships and in the Indo-Pacific regions (Blanchett, et. al 2022). In particular for the Sino-US rivalry, China may take this opportunity to set a precedent

for more provocative military actions in the Asia-pacific region, and the US can respond to the China's provocations with more resolute actions, potentially escalating the conflicts (Haenle & Sher 2022).

Case Selection Rationale

The Pelosi visit has profound implications for China's foreign policy and nationalism. The PRC has always considered the self-ruled Taiwan as its breakaway province, and vowed to "reunify" with it, by force if necessary. The Taiwan issue belongs to China's "core interest" which is "non-negotiable" (Zeng et al., 2015). The cross-strait relationship not only involves the PRC and Taiwan, but also the US which has pledged support for Taiwan, constituting the Sino-US-Taiwan "triangle relationship" (Kuntic 2015). Moreover, the Taiwan issue is at the heart of Chinese nationalism due to its implications of sovereignty, territorial integrity, the rejuvenation of Chinese nation and the realization of "China Dream" (Brown 2022). Regarding this thesis's research questions, the Pelosi case provides a good opportunity to examine the propagation of cyber nationalism in the context of a major geopolitical event involving China's core interests.

The geopolitical significance of Pelosi's visit is beyond doubt. What has been largely neglected by most international observers, however, is how different actors within China responded to this event. The official responses to the Pelosi visit are filled with furious and assertive rhetoric insinuating tough responses. One of the most remarkable examples are the "Preparing for war" (*beizhan*, 备战) post issued by the official account of PLA's 80th Army on Weibo. Zhao Lijian, the infamous "wolf warrior" spokesperson of MoFA, concluded the daily press conference with the veiled yet

profound comment “We shall wait and see” (*shimu yidai*, 拭目以待) (MoFA 2022b). Given such assertive rhetoric, it is intriguing to observe the discontents from the Chinese public. Despite the international consensus on the PLA’s military exercise as unprecedented and deeply concerning, many Chinese netizens expressed anger because they considered the state’s responses did not match its harsh rhetoric. Many expected pre-emptive measures to prevent Pelosi’s landing or even a full-scale war with Taiwan, only disappointed to find out Pelosi’s successful landing (Bloomberg 2022). The military drills were ridiculed as “bombing fish”, and Zhao’s “wait and see” comment was appropriated as a sarcastic retort to official propaganda. The “Preparing for war” post by the 80th Army saw an outpouring of sarcasm and criticism in the comment section. Most complaints have since been deleted, but the state’s worry of a backlash was reflected by its temporary shutdown of major social media platforms immediately upon Pelosi’s landing in Taiwan (Hua 2022).

Chinese netizens’ reaction to the incident is an indication that the Pelosi case is more than an occasion where unanimous anger of Chinese public is directed at foreign actors. Granted, China’s popular nationalism is known for its radical stance and at times contentions with official nationalism (Weiss 2014; Shirk 2007). It remains interesting, and indeed concerning though, to observe many Chinese people’s genuine disappointment at not using force to deter Pelosi or even taking back Taiwan by force. Regarding this thesis’s research question, the nationalistic backlash from the public offers an opportunity to examine how cyber nationalism is propagated during a public opinion crisis arising from the perceived inadequacy of the state’s response.

Research Approach

This thesis argues that the key to understand the interactions between China's official and grassroots nationalism lies in unpacking the intermediary level represented by China's popular propagandists. Communicating on Weibo, popular propagandists' operation is a crucial part of China's "total propaganda" that permeates into people's everyday life. The quantification of codes reveal that the Pelosi case generated a high level of "propaganda warming" (Edelstein 1997: 9) from popular propagandists and elicited most intensive and diversified nationalist expressions. Expressing opinion, informing and neologism are the most commonly adopted propaganda tactics, and anti-foreign sentiments, cohesion, statism and national pride are the most frequently expressed nationalist themes. The case study turns to the textual level and uses a combination of process tracing and thematic analysis, both of which are common analytical strategy in qualitative content analysis (Glaser & Laudel 2019; Morse 2008). The presence of the three time points dividing the whole incident into different stages justifies the use of process tracing, while the identification of thematic expressions helps to illustrate how specific nationalism themes and propaganda tactics manifest on the textual level.

Findings

Phase one: Pre-visit

The Pelosi case did not receive much attention until July 29th. Several distinctive narrative patterns emerge from the pre-visit period. First, popular propagandists casted doubts on the visit by citing the objections from the US military and the ambiguous

rhetoric US government. Interestingly, many actors suggested that Pelosi "dare not come" and celebrated the hypothesis as a proof for China's formidable power. For example, some joked that Pelosi "might choose to sneak into Taiwan on a submarine". Some interpreted the US's ambiguous attitudes as a sign of its "weakness". For example, Shen Yi sarcastically remarked that the US turned the so-called "state visit" into a "hide-and-seek" under the pressure of China. Sima Nan argued that the diverging views from the US decision makers shows the country has caught up with "Imperialism declining syndrome". By dismissing the possibility of the visit, popular propagandists downgrade the US's capacity as its rival and serves the function of integration propaganda (Ellul 1965: 76). Such narratives show that China's nationalist expressions are emboldened in recent years (Zhao 2021), as it is more likely to challenge and belittle its major rival.

The second narrative pattern is "promising assertiveness", which threatens harsh retaliations should the visit go ahead. Popular propagandists frequently cited assertive statements from official actors in their narratives with their own interpretations, often ended up levelling up the level of assertiveness. For example, MoFA spokesperson Zhao Lijian's "let's wait and see", MoD spokesperson Tan Kefei's "shall not sit back and watch", and the Weibo posts of PLA 80th Army (Preparing for War) and Eastern Theatre (burying all enemies who dare to invade) were among the popular quotations and reproductions. The frequent reference to official rhetoric suggests that popular propagandists were playing the "top-down" transmission function, albeit in different ways. Some communicators, such as Jin Canrong, Henghe and Hawk were simply reposting official information without adding their own comments. Some actors, however, took a more proactive approach to interpret and elaborate on official

positions with more colourful rhetoric. For example, Shen Yi quoted an old idiom "Don't say words were not foretold" (*wuwei yanzhi buyu*, 勿谓言之不预) to add to the eloquence of official messages. He even insinuated the possible military confrontations with the US by signalling "all options are not off the table, including the military one". He was not the only one whose messages displayed higher assertiveness than the official message. The most well-known example is Hu Xijin, who openly called to shoot down Pelosi's plane on X and generated huge media sensations (Reuters 2022). Moving to his "home court", Hu celebrated his "victory" on X and reiterated his aggressive rhetoric:

> *"If the US military planes escorts Pelosi into Taiwan, the action would amount to invasion. Therefore, PLA have every right to intercept the planes in various ways, such as firing warning shoots or making obstructive flying manoeuvres. If they refused to back off, we could shoot them down."*

The veteran journalist did not forget to take this opportunity to wage an ideological assault on the hypocrisy of "free speech", as he whined about having to delete his tweet due to pressure from the platform. He concluded his long post by reiterating his position that the US should not "play with fire on the Taiwan issue".

Popular propagandists who tried to warn off Pelosi varied in their expressions, ranging from proposing military options to making light-hearted jokes. For example, Shen Yi suggested that China could use its military drill as a pretext to justify the "unfortunate accident" of shooting down her plane, which would be jointly reported by CCTV and CNN. In another post, he called on China "not to tie our hands up" and upheld the "mad dog spirit" and "open fire" when necessary. The message is communicated with

clear reference to Xi Jinping's "dare to fight" prescriptions in conducting diplomacy and Wang Xiaodong's "the spirit of militancy" (Hille et al., 2023; Wang 2005). Some communicators went a step further by calling for an immediate "forceful unification" (*wutong*, 武统) with Taiwan. From their perspective, since unification with Taiwan is an inevitable outcome, Pelosi's visit would only accelerate this process. It is worthwhile to highlight the post of Sima Nan, who proposed to secure "strategic goals and partial victory" by taking back Penghu and Lanyu islands. None of the popular propagandists considered China in a disadvantaged position in a military confrontation with Taiwan, where the PLA would no doubt "crush" the Taiwanese military. The most belligerent view came from Hu Xijin, as he argued that even an US intervention was not to fear, because "China's proximity to the Taiwan island means it could maximize its air power against the US, which comes from afar." Popular propagandists' hyper-nationalistic expressions during the pre-visit period went far beyond the assertiveness of official nationalism. Neither official media, such as People's Daily, nor government officials, such as MoFA spokesperson, even remotely hinted at taking concrete military actions. On some occasions, popular propagandists even "distorted" the official messages, and such distortion could be achieved by subtly twisting a single character. For example, one phrase from the official statement "waiting in solemnity" (*yanzhengyidai*, 严正以待), saw its meaning twisted in the reproduction process by a manipulation of homophones, whose meaning was turned into "waiting in combat readiness" (*yanzhenyidai*, 严阵以待). This could impress the Chinese public that China was seriously preparing a military campaign in response to this incident and paved the way for the incoming backlash.

Popular propagandists are not the first to air such hawkish and ultra-nationalistic views. Their narratives mirror the hawkish, though sidelined faction within China's officialdom, represented by figures like retired general Zhu Chenghu who has long time called for a military solution on Taiwan and a nuclear war with the US (Lieggi 2004). Moreover, such views are popular on the grassroots. In territorial disputes, for example, the majority of Chinese public are willing to support government's military actions, even in confrontation with the US (Zhong & Hwang 2021). The level of assertiveness increases with the Internet-savvy younger generations whose nationalistic stance does not mainly derive from their identity but from their beliefs in China's assertive foreign policy (Weiss 2019: 692). In relation to propaganda, popular propagandists' communication during the pre-visit period is a typical form of agitation propaganda (Ellul 1965: 71), which instigates the public and raises their expectations of the assertiveness of state responses. Moreover, the belligerent rhetoric also signals to both the domestic public and the international audience of its seriousness (Huang 2015).

Phase two: Immediate Aftermath

Pelosi's Taiwan visit went ahead despite warnings from China. The code quantification shows that the communication activeness rose sharply on the day when Pelosi landed in Taiwan, mainly driven by several actors' 24/7 coverage of Pelosi's whereabout. Almost all actors drastically scaled back their posting frequency a day afterwards, only resuming after Pelosi left Taiwan. Since the data was collected in real-time, the factor of a large-scaled, systematic censorship can be ruled out. In other words, popular propagandists voluntarily scaled back their communicative activeness during this period. Meanwhile, corresponding to the "cohesion" and "statism"

nationalism themes, the narrative patterns of “calm down and trust the government” emerged during this period. These narratives correspond to the characteristics of “integration propaganda” (Ellul 1965: 71), in an attempt to quell the overheated online public opinions. For example, Lu Kw used his brief message “Rest assured. We are not going into a war.” to appeal calm. Sifen expressed his “unconditional” support for the government’s decisions.

Some messages of integration appear more sophisticated by empathizing public frustrations. Hawk, for example, invoked the history of 1996 Taiwan strait crisis and 2001 Sino-US plane crash accidents and argued that “these are truly shameful moments for us, but we have made it through and become stronger”. Despite expressing regrets, Hawk encouraged his audience to “carry on”. His narratives also mirrored President Xi’s talk of “national rejuvenation”, as the Chinese nation had already “become a strong and fearful global power” by the “joint efforts” of the Party and the people. Equally acknowledging the public frustrations, Hu Xijin expressed understandings to the public anger towards him for making exaggerated remarks. Hu shared the Hawk’s views that Chinese public should not lose faith because this incident, nor taking it as a new “national humiliation”. What the public should do, argued Hu, is to “trust our Party, government and PLA”, who aims for “nothing but national interest and people’s welfare”, “wholeheartedly support our state’s countermeasures, and prevent some evil forces disrupting our online public sphere and damaging our unity”. Though expressing understandings towards public dissatisfactions, Hu also issued precaution against “troublemakers” by drawing a clear line between “rightful complaints” and those with “ulterior moves”. Popular propagandists’ appeasing of public anger contained both “humiliation” and “pride” in

their messages, two key themes of Chinese nationalism (Wang 2014). The "humiliation" messages demonstrated their genuine understanding to the disappointed public, while the "pride" messages aimed to boost up public confidence in the Party-state to put things back on the right track.

However, not all popular propagandists opted for integration propaganda and pledged "unconditional support" for the state's response. Some openly expressed doubts over the state's publicity of this matter. DY, for example, considered the tough statements from MoFA "excessive and unnecessary", which were highly embarrassing and failed to "fool the public". In a more nuanced manner, Henghe suggested that "it is only natural for people to have grumbles" and she did not agree with "merely talk the talk but not walk the talk". Her dissatisfactions towards state publicity were telling: "Have they considered whether this is the best way to communicate with the public? Are they being too detached from the people, overly swaggering or overly ambiguous? Some reflections are needed." Henghe was careful not to directly call out official actors, but the invoking of phrases such as "the people" (*laobaixing*, 老百姓), "high-above" (*gaogaozaishang*, 高高在上) and "detached from the people" (*tuoli qunzhong*, 脱离群众) insinuated criticisms to the decision-makers. KLLF was less conceited of his discontents: "What has happened tonight tells us that talking tough weighs less than a fart – What we need is acting tough!" He was also dissatisfied with the censorship by sarcastically calling the Internet blackout as either a "coincident" or a "drill in "public sentiment management".

Apparently, many popular propagandists did not shy away from expressing dissatisfaction towards how the overall "tone" of this incident was set in the first place.

However, most actors were careful to restrict their criticisms to the aspect of publicity, falling short of indicating the inadequacy of state response. Though such criticisms contained the "critical nationalism" expressions, they were carefully managed to contain public dissents and divert them away from the more disturbing aspects of public dissatisfaction. Therefore, they still served the purpose of integration propaganda. Nevertheless, the debate on the discrepancy between rhetorical assertiveness and actual response led to an unexpected interlude, as a trifle broke out between several prominent opinion leaders over what is the appropriate communication strategy during such a crisis.

Interlude: Conflicts within Popular Propagandists

The common hostility towards Pelosi, the US and Tawain "independence force" did not diminish popular propagandists' internal disagreements. On August 3, Chairman Rabbit, a Harvard graduate and "princeling figure"[9] whose real name is Ren Yi, posted a long article on Weibo blaming Hu Xijin for the backfire of state publicity. I present the original quotes as follows:

> *"If publicity is not followed by effective measures, the public shall feel confused and disappointed, and the government might lose its credibility… However, the state publicity of Pelosi incident was actually not ridiculously assertive. So, who is to blame? Hu Xijin…… The former chief editor (of Global Times) is widely believed to belong to "the system", but we can tell that he always seems to lack the best judgement on critical matters……When he issues opinions on X, many foreigners take him as the*

[9] Ren Yi is the grandfather is Ren Zhongyi, former Party Secretary of Guangdong Province.

spokesperson for our government…… and an authoritative figure, but in reality, he often discusses things beyond his duty and his knowledge."

The princeling key opinion leader was defending the government's record by portraying Hu Xijin as the chief culprit leading to the public opinion crisis. According to him, Hu had abused his status as an "authoritative figure" by making "inflammatory comments" and suggesting "implausible countermeasures". His final remarks on Hu acting beyond his "knowledge" and "duty" pointed to more crucial issues not only concerned Hu but the cohort of popular propagandists: Are they well-informed enough to "guide" public opinions? Should they be held accountable for what they have posted? Such concerns had long been shared by regulators, who had published targeted regulations on disciplining online content producers' act of "hyping up" (*chaozuo*, 炒作) (CAC 2019). Chairman Rabbit was not alone in criticizing Hu Xijin. Immediately after Hu Xijin proposed "flying alongside Pelosi", the military columnist KLLF accused him of lacking common sense about international law and talking "nonsense". After Pelosi's landing, he mocked Hu's downplaying the severity of Pelosi visit and called on him to "stop playing with frisbee"[10], a derogatory uninym attacking Hu's inconsistency.

Far from regretting for what he had proposed, Hu defended his seemingly outrageous comments as a failed attempt to warn Pelosi back, which was the only thing he regretted. Having defended his own record, Hu turned to his critics:

[10] Hu Xijin's critics practice neologism and invents the phrase "The Frisbee guy" (胡叼盘), comparing him to a dog catching up with the frisbee. This criticize Hu as the Party-state's spin doctor who is forced to be inconsistent and self-contradictory in order to defend the state.

> *"I would like to ask these guys: Where were you when I was going out my way deterring Pelosi and the US on X? …… I despise these people, and I am proud to be a soldier of Special Force in the online discursive battlefield."*

Not acknowledging his mistakes in leading to a public opinion crisis, Hu pictured himself as a "Special Force" who used unconventional tactics beyond the "knowledge and duty" of normal key opinion leaders. In refuting his critics, Hu tried to further consolidate his status as the most influential and respectable communicator who always fought at the forefront and took all the risks himself. His self-defence referred to President Xi's call for "fight for discursive power" and "confident rise" (Lee 2016), both of which are impossible to realize without assertive rhetoric.

Among Hu Xijin's critics, Chairman Rabbit was no doubt the harshest one as well as the most influential one due to his princeling status. Apparently aware of this, Hu sarcastically called out Chairman Rabbit as "a red and professional" (*hongyouzhuan*, 红又专[11]), indicating that the Harvard graduate being too young, detached from reality, only knowing "books" but not "real battles". Touting his achievements of "rattling US media, public opinions and policy makers", Hu suggested that Chairman Rabbit might be envious of his influential online status and "prayed for my speedy retirement". He concluded his responses with more politeness and reminded all his "colleagues" that they were facing a "common enemy" and should unite rather than quarrel with each other. Not backing up, Chairman Rabbit hit back that Hu had "the wrong calculations" and disrupted the state's original plan in guiding public opinion,

[11] Red (红) and professional (专) are considered to crucial standards for selecting and promoting cadres in the Party, with the former suggesting one's ideological reliability and the latter one's professionalism and competence.

leading to an “extremely rare and unexpected public crisis”. Crucially, Chairman Rabbit pointed out that key opinion leaders should be cautious in what they post, “differentiating between domestic and international audience” (*neiwaiyoubie*, 内外有别). Moreover, following the same logic as online influencers and celebrities who pursued for clickbait was “dangerous”. He went further and talked about the social responsibility of opinion leaders:

We always leave problems behind for the sake of ‘harmony’. The public deserve an answer over this time’s public opinion crisis. An influential figure like Hu Xijin should be able to hold the responsibility.”

The war of words between popular propagandists saw little signs of reconciliation except for the wish for the “rejuvenation of Chinese nation” and the struggle “against our common enemy”. This suggests the status of “Xi Jinping Thought” as the overarching ideological framework and its normative power in regulating China’s public discourse (Mulvad 2019). While the presence of a foreign threat did not diminish conflicts within popular propagandists, it did provide extra grounds and motivations for them to leave aside disagreements. Moreover, the debates actually functioned as a distraction and led the public attention away from the perceived inadequacy of state responses. A point worth our attention is Hu Xijin’s repeated mention of his contributions on foreign platforms such as X, while Chairman Rabbit emphasized on the domestic implications of Hu’s speeches. The diverging emphasis points to an awkward situation of popular propagandists: The overwhelming majority of them only speak to the Chinese public, and Hu Xijin is among the very few exceptions who also have an international audience. While Hu lauded his own

achievements on the international "discursive battlefields", his fellow commentators based on Chinese cybersphere are unlikely to fully appreciate its implications. The Hu vs. Chairman Rabbit debate mirrors the dilemma faced by China's domestic and foreign propaganda, whose different strategic goals often lead to contradictions in their operations (Wang 2023; Tsai 2016). In this case, Hu's signalling in order to threaten off foreign actors led to China's domestic public opinion crisis.

Phase Three: Military Drill

The trifle between popular propagandists did not dominate the discussion agenda for a long time. As soon as Pelosi left Taiwan and China launched large-scaled military drill, the overall tone, the focus and narrative patterns of popular propagandists changed substantially. In the "military drill" period, the first prominent narrative pattern is a repudiation of netizens questioning the official response. For example, many Chinese netizens joked that the military drill could achieve nothing other than "bombarding fish" (*zhayu*, 炸鱼). In a sharp contrast to their empathy with public frustrations during the pre-visit period, popular propagandists condemned such narratives as sabotage, corresponding to the surge of "denouncing traitor" nationalism theme in this period. Most actors established their arguments in close alignment with the official position, corresponding to the feature of "political propaganda" (Ellul 1965: 62). For example, Henghe lambasted at the "bombarding fish" comment as "an insult to our PLA soldiers and utter disrespect to our military." In an emotional post, Sifen condemned those expressing "sarcasm with ulterior motives" as "talking nonsense". Taking a less confrontational tone, Hu defended the drill's effectiveness as it had caused "fear" among Taiwanese public. The term "forceful unification" (*wutong*,

武统) was repeatedly mentioned in drill-related narratives, though most of which no longer described it as an immediate goal to achieve but rather an inevitable outcome in the future. There were, however, a handful of actors still hinting possibility of escalation. For example, KLLF expressed his "hope" that an accident of "missile flying off track and hitting somewhere else" could happen so that "everyone gets what they want".

The second discernible narrative pattern can be summarized as "new normal" which celebrates the effectiveness of military drill and heralded a triumphant China in reginal and global politics. The term "new normal" (*xinchangtai*, 新常态) frequently appeared in popular propagandists' narratives. Initially used by President Xi Jinping in 2014 to describe, or justify, the slowing-down of China's economic development (Holbig 2018), the term has gone viral in China's official propaganda and Party speak as a key component of "Xi Jinping Thought". I argue that popular propagandists' adoption of "new normal" in a different context is as an example of how official propaganda is reproduced at the grassroots, a process giving it new meanings (Zeng 2020). In this case, popular propagandists viewed the Pelosi incident as a watershed for the formation of a "new normal" in the Taiwan strait. Details such as the PRC's missile flying over Taiwan, its warships' intruding into Taiwan's coastline and the "sealing off" of the island were repeatedly mentioned as proof for "new normal". In particular, the PLA's crossing of "Taiwan strait medium line" (*taihai zhongxian*, 台海中线) was highlighted for its symbolic importance. Apart from such micro-perspectives focusing on details of the military drill, many communicators also took a macro-perspective and contemplated the power balance between the PRC and Taiwan. For example, Jin Canrong's, comparing China's responses towards two "Taiwan strait crisis" in 1996

and 2022, argued that "we are no longer in a passive position but holding all initiatives in our hand". Hu Xijin went a step further by commenting that it was a matter of "willingness" for China to "reunite with Taiwan" since it could take any measures "at any time". In other words, the "new normal" refers to the shifting power balance in the Taiwan strait with the PRC taking an upper hand.

Popular propagandists' stress on the theme of "reunification" via the "new normal" narratives both echoes with and developed President Xi's consolidation of the "One China principle" as a strategic framework for "boxing Taiwan into the eventual reunification" (Huang 2017: 244). However, the "new normal" narratives concerning the future of the Taiwan strait remained an ambiguous term which received various interpretations from different actors. To begin with, the "new normal" seemed to bear more symbolic rather than strategic significance. For example, the details from the military drill were mostly celebrated by their symbolic achievement in smashing Taiwan's "pseudo-sovereignty", and the frequently mentioned "crossing Taiwan strait medium line" was also of little strategic importance. By focusing on symbolic significance, popular propagandists manufactured a sense of victory for their audience, filling in their nationalist "imaginaries" (Wu 2014: 180). Moreover, popular propagandists did not have a consistent view on the power balance in the Taiwan strait under the "new normal". Some communicators, such as Jin Canrong and KLLF, interpreted it as the PRC having "superior" and "insurmountable" military advantages over Taiwan. Some, however, went a step further and claimed that China held an "invincible position" in the Taiwan strait should the US intervene in a potential conflict (Hu Xijin and Sima Nan). The most ambitious interpretation of "new normal" comes from Shen Yi. Being the first one using the phrase in the context of cross-strait

relationship, Shen conceived that the Pelosi visit did not only reflect the shifting power balance in the Taiwan strait, but also the broader Sino-US competition on the global stage. He hit back at US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement of preserving "status quo" in the Taiwan strait as "a reflection of the US hegemony and the hegemonic world order", and the "new normal" set by China shall "absolutely reject and break through such distorted status quo". According to him, the Chinese public also had a role to pay in constructing "new normal":

> *"Everyone of us has a part to play in the Sino-US competition. It is time for you to decide whether to turn your gun inward by releasing your irrational anger, or unite, make reasonable judgement, and contribute your own bit to the construction of 'New Normal'?"*

Once again addressing the dissatisfaction on the grassroots, Shen indicated that personal feelings should give way to the "big picture". The nationalist undertone of his message was one of "cohesion" via a "us vs. them" dichotomy. The message was clear: either choosing "us" by following the state's direction and contributing to "new normal" or becoming a hostile "other".

A final remark on the "new normal" narrative is the reappearance of the "war-talk", though in quite different forms compared with those emerged in the pre-visit period. Rather than offering concrete propositions of military operations, it insinuated the inevitability of using force of to solve the Taiwan issue. The drill was portrayed as a textbook example of how a war of "forceful reunification" should be fought. The Pelosi visit indicated that the US and "Taiwan independence force" were "determined to stick to the wrong path", which made a "peaceful solution" increasingly unlikely. Falling short of agitation propaganda due the absence of strong emotions and

provocative remarks, such narratives were still concerning in the sense that a consensus of "forceful unification" was formed among popular propagandists and communicated to the public

To sum up, the "new normal" narrative both functioned as a form of integration propaganda and agitation propaganda. It is integrational in the sense that the narratives stress the alignment with the official position, reassure the public of China's inevitable victory, and appeal for cohesion. However, they also challenge the status quo in the Taiwan strait, if not extending to the global stage.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Pelosi visit is not the first case where angry Chinese nationalists protested against the perceived inadequacy in state response towards foreign provocations, and most literature conceive such incidents as the contention between popular nationalism and official nationalism (Weiss 2014; Ma 2015; Zhang & Ma 2023). This case study reveals how popular propagandists, as the intermediary between official and popular nationalism, contribute to and resolve such contentions via their communication activities. The inflammatory rhetoric during the pre-visit period elevated public expectations of official assertiveness and contributed to tensions between popular and official nationalism. Rather than being the mouthpiece of the state, popular propagandists at times reinterpreted or even distorted the official positions when communicating with their audience.

This finding raises a further question: Why did popular propagandists take such a move that risked harming the government's legitimacy? On the one hand, it is likely that the Xi administration's growing assertiveness emboldened popular propagandists

(Friedberg 2014), as illustrated by Xi's repeated emphasis on "discursive rights" (*huayu quan*, 话语权) on the international stage and the burgeoning "wolf warrior" diplomacy (Dai & Luqiu 2022). Moreover, the involvement of Taiwan, one of the most important points in China's nationalism, further adds to the case's stake. For popular propagandists, taking a belligerent stance on this issue is not only desirable but also necessary to demonstrate their political correctness. On the other hand, popular propagandists could utilize this occasion for self-promotion. As online influencer, popular propagandists chase clickbait by producing sensational contents, a practice fundamentally different from that of official propagandists who have strict organizational rule and ideological constraints (Shambaugh 2007). The eventfulness of Pelosi case provides them with a golden opportunity for propagating nationalist messages outside of daily mundanity. They could be intentionally taking a belligerent stance to side with popular nationalism and cater to the taste of cyber nationalists (Hyun et al., 2014). In other words, popular propagandists' "distortion" of official line with ultra-aggressive and belligerent reinterpretations can be seen as a well-calculated gamble of self-promotion.

The frequent appearance of "war-talk" and "forceful unification" in popular propagandists' narratives worth our attention. Though the call for liberating Taiwan by force has existed in the PRC for a long time (Chiu 1983), the fact that nearly all of them embraced such narratives points to a concerning trend in the cross-strait relationship. It suggests that the "peaceful unification", once the orthodox Taiwan solution promoted by the state, is losing its appealing power among Chinese nationalists, implying a hawkish turn in China's online public opinions on Taiwan issue. A tentative argument is that such narratives may psychologically prepare the

Chinese public for a future conflict in the Taiwan strait. Supporting this argument are a substantial proportion of posts promoting the anti-Taiwan sentiment. The frequent adoption of the dehumanizing neologist term "Taiwan frog" (*taiwa*, 台蛙) and the construction of Taiwanese people as incompetent, naïve, dependent on the US and "too nasty to fix" were among the most striking examples of its expression, I argue that as Chinese nationalism under President Xi places more emphasis on denouncing "them" than affirming "us", and such hostility has gone beyond limited foreign actors to include Taiwan as a subject "too nasty to fix" (*wuke jiuyao*, 无可救药).

To sum up, popular propagandists' communications around Pelosi's Taiwan visit displayed diversified propaganda styles and nationalist messages. Overall, "anti-foreign" sentiments critical of both the US and Taiwan dominated the nationalist narratives, and the propaganda style bore close resemblance to political propaganda as reflected from the close alignment with the official line. Before Pelosi landed in Taiwan, messages from popular propagandists displayed characteristics of agitation propaganda by issuing threats and instigating public anger. However, the rhetoric took a drastic turn after the visit was concluded, incorporating more integrational messages. Despite their uniformity in condemning the US and Taiwan "separatists", popular propagandists' messages displayed more divergence rather than convergence, as they varied in their proposals, interpretations and ways of expressions.

The Pelosi case demonstrates how cyber nationalism is propagated around on a geopolitical event involving China's core interests. It remains unclear whether and how the propagation pattern changes when an event is mainly concerned with China's

domestic politics. The next chapter examines a case of drastically different nature: The debate about China's Covid management and anti-lockdown protest.

Chapter Seven: Anti-lockdown Protests and Covid-19 Management

Introduction

Background

In late November 2022, a series of protests erupted in China. Chants of "Step down, Xi Jinping! Step down, Communist Party", "We want freedom, we don't want emperor" were heard across the country's largest cities including Shanghai, Beijing and Chengdu (Yeung 2022). Accompanying the unequivocal slogans was the highly symbolic action of holding high blank A4 sheets. Invoking the tactic of a Polish newspaper in 1924, protestors expressed their dissents towards censorships via sarcasm. The trigger of widespread protests was a tragic incident happened on November 24th in Ürümqi, Xinjiang, where a fire broke out in a resident building led to the death of 10 people, with 5 from the same household. Xinjiang had been under strict lockdown since September and residents had been complaining about the lack of medicine and food (Kang 2022). What further fuelled the public's indignation was the assumption that the lockdown measures hindered the escaping and rescue effort, and local officials' criticisms of those "breaking lockdown rules" by escaping from the building (Tian 2022). A local protest in Ürümqi erupted on November 25th, forcing the local authorities to partially ease the lockdown. From November 26th, Chinese citizens in multiple localities took to the street mourning for the victims in Xinjiang. Many memorials turned into protests demanding the end of "Zero-Covid", some of which directly criticized the central government and the top leader. The protests continued throughout the weekend in many localities, but soon waned down in the coming week.

The fundamental reason of the protests lies in the central government's intransigence over its pandemic control approach. China had insisted on imposing strict lockdowns and mass testing throughout the pandemic. According to official data, China's "Zero-Covid" policy did keep the death rate lower and the economic growth faster than other major economies in the early stage of the pandemic (Wei 2022). However, the Omicron variant emerging in later period highlighted the inflexibility of the policy, due to the variant's highly transmissible yet less detrimental nature. Despite this, the leadership was unconcerned and vowed to continue this approach. At the 20th Party Congress held in October 2022, President Xi announced that China would "unwaveringly insist on the dynamic 'Zero-Covid' approach", which was also written into the working report of the conference (CPC News 2022). Before this round of protests, several collective incidents had already broken out in Lanzhou, Guangzhou, Henan and Chongqing in relation to complaints of pandemic control. Before the 20th Party Congress, a "lone wolf" protestor hung a banner on Beijing's Sitong Bridge, which explicitly denounced the Party leadership and called for an end to "Zero-Covid" (Hawkins 2023).

Case Selection Rationale

Protests are not uncommon in China, but the vast majority of them focus on socio-economic issues such as labour and land disputes without calling for political reform or challenging the regime after 1989 (Perry 2001). In fact, many protestors would explicitly demonstrate their loyalty to Beijing, either hoping for state intervention to solve the disputes, or avoiding punishment as a tactical move (Lagerkvist 2012). Despite the use of anti-Xi and anti-Party slogans, I consider the 2022 anti-lockdown not fundamentally different from the grievance-provoked protests in China, which do

not fundamentally challenge the rule of the Party. However, its importance goes beyond the common protests in China considering the special context of Covid-19. Protestors were challenging arguably one of the most crucial sociopolitical issues at the time by questioning the government's long-held "Zero-Covid" approach. Moreover, its impacts and pressure exerted on Beijing should not be underestimated. After the protests, Beijing soon signalled relaxing pandemic control and gradually renounced the "Zero-Covid" approach it once vowed to unwaveringly insist upon. Therefore, I consider the case of great value for examination.

Over the last two decades, mass media and social media have played an increasingly active role in shaping the narratives around protests in China (Cottle 2008; Garrett 2006). Previous research on how China's public discussions of protest focus on the censorship (King et al., 2013) or how the Internet facilitates the mobilization of popular protests (Huang & Yip 2012). However, how the Internet-based news outlets cover protests have since been understudied. As a crucial part of China's online media ecosystem, popular propagandists play an important role in constructing narratives around protests. From the perspective of Chinese nationalism, the protests can be seen as an eruption of popular nationalism over the "blood shed by our countrymen" (Wu 2014: 238). It remains to see how the propaganda and nationalist profiles of popular propagandists manifest on this issue. In relation to this thesis's overarching research question, this case study explores how cyber nationalism is propagated on a hyper-sensitive issue, if not a taboo in China's information environment. I focus on the event-centred aspects of protests as the "public discourse on protest, protesters, and protest policing" (Della Porta 1999: 67).

The anti-lockdown protests happened in the transition period in China's pandemic control. On the one hand, the central and local governments were sending out mixed signals on whether China should continue the "Zero-Covid" policy. On the other hand, the Chinese public were expressing different concerns regarding the pandemic control, as some were upset about the excessive control measures while some still opposed relaxing control in fear of the virus. In other words, this case's importance goes beyond the dimension of public discussions of protests and extends to the debates about China's pandemic management. Moreover, Chinese government has long branded its "Zero-Covid" policy as a superior approach to the West's "coexisting with the virus", even to the extent of tying national image and regime legitimacy with the Covid combat approach (Schneider 2021: 318). Pandemic control, therefore, is more than a policy issue but also relates to China's national image, regime legitimacy and the public's feeling of national pride. Regarding the thesis's research question, the enquiry on public discussions of pandemic control offers a rare opportunity to examine how cyber nationalism is propagated around a niche nationalist issue and during a major policy shift (See for example, Speelman 2023; Jin 2023).

Research Approach

I focus on the communication activities of popular propagandists, who are nationalistic online key opinion leaders on Weibo, in order to understand the propagation of cyber nationalism. Situated between formal propaganda apparatus and the grassroots, popular propagandists perform a key role in China's "total propaganda", understood as the systematic effort to impose a set of values on the public. The quantification of codes reveals that the protest issue was barely discussed on Weibo. Nevertheless, I consider the existing propaganda narratives of great value for examination as they can

reveal what are the permissible range for the discussion of such a sensitive issue. In contrast, Covid-19 management dominated the discussion agenda. The issue of pandemic control holds no less significance than the protest, judging both from the high stakes Chinese government tied to this issue and the peculiar timing of the policy shift. Therefore, the case study includes narratives not only on protests but also those on Covid-19 management. Using thematic analysis, I focus on the textual level and separately examines popular propagandists' narratives patterns on issues of protest and Covid-19 management. The data also shows that the level of information richness and the proportion of emotional rhetoric drop substantially in posts related to anti-lockdown protests and Covid management, while popular propagandists demonstrated greater willingness to share personal views on such issues. They also tended to express reflexive voices and criticisms towards the government, while simultaneously posting more pro-regime messages and dismissing dissents. The textual analysis shall explain how popular propagandists deal with such seemingly contradictory positions.

Findings

Protest

The coding results set out in Chapter Five has shown that popular propagandists did not discuss the anti-lockdown protests with great enthusiasm. "Statism" and "denouncing traitor" are the two most prominent nationalism themes. Overall, popular propagandists resolutely sided with the state and condemned the protestors as rioters and being "unpatriotic". An in-depth reading into relevant posts summarizes four narrative patterns: embracing the government, degrading protestors, manufacturing public resistance (towards protestors) and blaming foreign interference.

Embracing Government

Chinese media have a record of holding "pro-establishment" stance in the coverage of protests, either domestic or foreign ones, where violence and chaos caused by protestors are highlighted but the government's disproportionate use of force is dismissed (Shahin et al., 2016; Luqiu 2021). With the exception of a brief period during the 1989 pro-democracy student movement, the reports on domestic protests challenging regime legitimacy take a firm pro-regime stance and ruthlessly denounce the protestors as the rioters and "enemy of the people" (Gittings 2001). Popular propagandists represent the latest digitalization wave in China's we media industry, where online news outlets, also known as we media (*zimeiti*, 自媒体), are playing an increasingly active role in news coverage (Lin & Zhang 2018). In this case, popular propagandists who commented on the protests pledged loyalty to the state through the "embracing the government" narratives, corresponding to the prominent nationalism theme "statism" reflected from the code quantification.

Compared with their unequivocal pro-regime messages, however, most actors remained extremely cautious when talking about the protest itself. For example, Hu Xijin spoke euphemistically and avoided directly mentioning the word "protest" or "demonstration" by insinuating that the society were currently "facing some difficulties and challenges in the management of public opinions and pandemic". He quickly turned to an upbeat tone and reminded his audience that China had managed to "overcome all kinds of hardships since 1949" and therefore "would no doubt weather the storm and become more prosperous and powerful". His message is a typical example of integration propaganda (Ellul 1965: 70) by downloading the severity of the issue and reassuring the public of the nation's prosperity. The invoking

of the PRC's nation building process further enhanced its "statism" messages as it signalled the Party-state's legitimacy to the public.

On top of the PRC's nation-building process, the 2019 Hongkong anti-extradition bill protest was another point for reference by popular propagandists. Hawk, for example, cited "the successful containment of the 2019 Hong Kong protest" and alleged that the current "turbulence" was no match to "riots" in Hongkong thanks to the efforts "our powerful troops and police force". In mainland China, reports on Hong Kong protests were heavily censored and extremely biased, omitting the violence against protestors while exaggerating the chaos caused by demonstrators (Zhang et al., 2023: 277). President Xi has used the Hong Kong case as a successful story of "turning chaos into order" (*congluan daozhi*, 从乱到治) (HKSAR 2022), turning it into an excellent example of integration propaganda. Compared to Hu's upbeat and unifying tone, the messages from Hawk appeared harsher, as he openly celebrated China's repressive capacity represented by "troops" and "police" as a guarantee for social stability. The pro-regime messages with explicit references to the oppressive status also plays the function of signalling propaganda (Huang 2015), discouraging potential dissidents from challenging the state.

Denouncing Protestors

The overwhelming majority of popular propagandists took a hardline against protestors, corresponding to the prominence of the "denouncing traitor" code. Instead of empathizing with protestors or acknowledging their concern, they adopted an intolerant stance and condemned protestors as unpatriotic or being manipulated. Lipsky famously argued that "the way in which [protests] are presented will influence

all other actors in the system, including the protesters themselves" (Lipsky 1968: 1151). Denouncing the protestors also prevents the wider public to sympathize with them because sympathetic coverage of protests leads to an increase of public dissatisfactions towards the regime (Hess & Martin, 2006). Dehumanizing phrases often appeared in their descriptions of protesters, such as "monsters and demons" (*niugui sheshen*, 牛鬼蛇神) and "evil spirits" (*chimei wangliang*, 魑魅魍魉).

Moreover, a sense of "us vs. them" dichotomy was often constructed by portraying protestors as the rioters who sowed chaos and divisions in society. Some actors went further by justifying and inciting violence against protestors by portraying a "people's war" between patriots" and "Han traitors" (*hanjian*, 汉奸). Moments of counter-protest were highlighted, especially those showing protestors violently beaten in cities of Chengdu and Xi'an. Popular propagandists also refuted netizens who displayed sympathy to the protestors. For example, Hawk attacked one sympathetic college student as "reading too much while knowing nothing about reality". Sifen compared those sympathizers to "keyboard warrior" (*jianpanxia*, 键盘侠), a neologism practice mocking online trollers who dare not take actions, and grilled why they did not join the protestors. In short, popular propagandists demonized protestors and ridiculed protestor-sympathizers. The denouncement towards protestors and their sympathizers carried both invented neologist phrases in the digital setting and reinvented slogans from the PRC's nation-building process, suggesting the coexistence of old and new propaganda.

In popular propagandists' narratives, one's stance on anti-lockdown protests suggests their political loyalty, and sympathizing with protestors meant unpatriotic. It is wrong,

however, to assume the imposing of nationalistic pressure as a unidirectional process from popular propagandists to the public. The lack of moderate voices was the result of content producers' self-censorship not only in fear of the official censors, but more importantly, the retribution from the nationalistic netizens (CGSC 2021). Lu Kw, for example, triggered backlash among his followers due to paying tribute to fire incident's victims. He was blamed for "instigations" and labelled as promoting "colour revolution" and "public intellectual" (*gongzhi*, 公知). The two phrases have gone through neologist reinvention in China's online discursive field and indicate one's ideological unreliability and political incorrectness. This interlude indicates that the increasingly intolerant nationalist expression on the Chinese Internet suppresses moderate voices.

Blaming "Foreign" Interference: Hongkongers as saboteur?

When it comes to domestic protests, the PRC's official propaganda has a tradition of blaming "foreign interference" or "foreign black hand" for manipulating and misleading the public into reckless actions, regardless of having concrete evidence or not (Mattingly & Yao 2020: 15; Zhao 2021: 152). The 1989 pro-democracy movement and the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests were among the most well-known examples (Zhang et al., 2021: 280). Therefore, popular propagandists' invoking of the same narrative pattern did not come as a surprise. For some commentators, the incident was interpreted as a "handbook of promoting a colour revolution" instigated by "CIA agents" who had "long penetrated our society". Such narratives manufactured an imagined foreign threat and instigated the public's anti-foreign sentiments. Some popular propagandists went further in adopting a more blunt, vulgar, aggressive and conspiratorial tone. Sima Nan, for example, alleged that

"certain influential scholars, intellectuals, businessmen" were all "potential collaborators" with foreign forces, and suggested deterring such figures by showing them "bloodshed". His nasty attitude was shared by Hawk, who claimed that China "is in need of another Boxer movement" to root out "traitors and spies". Boxers, known as *Yihetuan* in China, were formed by poverty-stricken people in late-Qing dynasty, who were infamous for their ultra-xenophobia and massacre of foreign missionaries. Despite official propaganda's ambivalence attitudes towards it, the Boxer movement is reimagined by China's popular nationalism as a myth and symbol for anti-imperialism, anti-colonization and affirmation of Chinese identity (Cohen 1992). Popular propagandists reproduced such myth in the new context of anti-lockdown protests targeting the imagined foreign threats and domestic collaborators.

Though the conspiratory tone of foreign interference is hardly a novel invention by popular propagandists, they reproduced the theme by finding a new scapegoat, the Hongkongers, to play the role of "foreign black hand". They argued that it was Hong Kong activists who sneaked into the mainland and organized the "riots" to destabilize Chinese society. The accusations against Hongkongers as the "black hand" are based on the collective memory of the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests, where pro-democracy activists were pictured as rioters and troublemakers through the official propaganda (Zhang et al., 2023: 277). Neologist phrases invented by China's cyber nationalists during the 2019 protests, such as "yellow ribbons" (*huangsi*, 黄丝) and "screwed youth" (*feiqing*, 废青) were reinvoked in this case.

The smearing of Hongkongers reinforced the public's negative stereotypes of "Hong Kong independence force" as evil forces and subject them to the process of "othering"

as Taiwanese discussed in Chapter Six. A widely distributed (unverified) video by popular propagandists showed the so-called "Hong Kong saboteurs" gave themselves away due to their accent. Invoking dialect and accent as affirmation or denial of one's "Chineseness" was a practice hitting two birds with one stone. On the one hand, it contained the cohesion nationalism messages by celebrating the language bonds uniting Chinese people. On the other hand, Hongkongers were stripped of their "Chinese" identity due to the differences in dialects, indicting their cultural insensitivity. Being able to speak the same dialect is a sign of unity and an indication of being "one of us", while the failure to do so renders one as an "outsider". Ironically, popular propagandists overlooked the tensions between local dialects with the mandarin when using the former as an affirmation or denial of one's Chinese identity (Wong & Xiao 2010).

Covid-19 Management

Unlike anti-lockdown protests, the issue of pandemic control dominated popular propagandists' discussion agenda in this period. Covid-19 had become part of parcel of the life of Chinese people for more than three years since 2020. Under such premise, the debates on how China should proceed with pandemic management, which contained mostly non-nationalistic and non-agitation languages, resemble the style of sociological propaganda (Ellul 1965: 63). The low presence of "neologism", indicating the narratives around this issue remain rather matter of fact, nevertheless goes hand in hand with vibrant discussions between fellow communicators and active reach-outs to the grassroots. In other words, propaganda messages of pandemic control display contrasting signs regarding different dimensions of new propaganda (Edelstein 1997: 4). An in-depth textual analysis reveals that each actor was consistent in their

own views of China's future pandemic control, but were divided into two camps holding contrasting views. The pro-opening camp, consisting of Hu Xijin, Sima Nan, Lu Kw, KLLF and Jin Canrong, supported the relaxation of control rules and the return to normal life. The anti-opening camp, including Henghe, Sifen, Hawk, Shen Yi and DY, insisted on continuing stringent control measures. The following sections will illustrate how each camp presented and defended their position.

"Anti-opening Camp": A Final "Sanctuary"?

Despite the outbreak of accidents and rising public grievance, many Chinese citizens were hesitant to support or even afraid of lifting controls (BBC China 2023b). Most of them registered their fears of long Covid and other lingering diseases (Mendoza 2022). The enduring fear towards Covid-19 founded the basis for the anti-opening camp, whose messages fed the public sentiment of fear. Many communicators openly voiced their opposition towards reopening and called for the continuance of strict pandemic control. Henghe, for example, wrote that "we should definitely hang on", and compared the relaxation of control as "surrender". Apart from citing numerous examples of severe long Covid symptoms, the anti-opening camp also projected the catastrophic scenery of overwhelmed medical system after reopening. Refuting a netizen who argued that mass-testing costed a lot of money, DY retorted back that the cost of overwhelming hospitals would be "beyond imagination".

Anti-opening camp tended to justify their position via card-stacking, a tactic presenting one-sided arguments and biased information in persuasion. Apart from disproportionately illustrating the downsides of relaxing controls, particular emphasis was given to localities where pandemic control rules were tightened, which were

praised for “not giving up” and “putting people’s life first”. “Science” was also utilized for anti-opening camp to consolidate their arguments, corresponding the characteristic of rational propaganda (Ellul 1965: 84). Leading scientists and epidemiologists who cautioned against potential new waves of outbreaks or new variants were frequently quoted. Aware of the public’s fatigue towards pandemic control, they portrayed themselves as the sober minority telling an unwelcoming yet unwavering truth. Those who supported relaxing controls, in contrast, were pictured as demagogues who simply “say nice things to win over the public”.

Two types of arguments for lifting restrictions were singled out and methodically refuted by anti-opening camp. The first type of argument centred on the growing public grievance at the excessive and unreasonable pandemic control measures. Apart from citing evidence of pandemic severity to justify the needs of having such measures in place, anti-opening camp argued that it was the “poor policy implementation” and “barbaric enforcement” of control measures by some local governments rather than the policy itself that should be blamed. It was the improvement of policy implementation, rather than the lifting of control measures, that would fundamentally solve the issue. The second type of criticism cited the changing nature of the virus and the global trend of relaxing control. Not only did the dominance of Omicron variant changed the situation, but also the launch of the 2022 Qatar World Cup coincided with the debate of pandemic management. In response to such arguments, anti-opening camp, unlike state media which censored the crowded audience while broadcasting the games, did not shy away from such facts but emphasized the high transmissions and chaos. Qatar’s “aristocratic” medical system that only cared about those privileged, according to their narratives, was also utilized to contrast China’s principle of “putting

people's life first" as further evidence of the superiority of China's pandemic control approach.

Coding results reveal that discussions around pandemic management are largely not nationalistic nor emotional. This finding elevates the importance of the concentrated nationalistic and emotional expressions from anti-opening camp, which goes into the direction of irrational propaganda (Ellul 1965: 84). Their anger was targeted at "lying-flat faction" (*tangping pai*, 躺平派), a neologist invention referring people who "surrendered" and supported lifting restrictions. The catchphrase emerges from China's post-Covid youth culture describing the lifestyle and mindset detesting competition, efforts and hard work, which is a disillusioned response towards the increasingly competitive job market and weak economy (Zhou 2023). Not surprisingly, it has been rejected and criticized by official media, which instead advocates for "striving forward" (*fenjin*, 奋进) to become a "worthy" youth (People.cn 2022b). In the context of pandemic management, "lying-flat" was picked up official propaganda to describe the "living with virus" approach adopted by other countries (People.cn 2022a). During Shanghai's Covid outbreak between March and June 2022, some Chinese netizens suspected that a "lying-flat faction" existed within the central leadership represented by then Shanghai mayor Li Qiang, who hesitated to impose strict lockdown.

While the official media had gradually dropped the phrase, "lying-flat faction" as a neologism practice remained popular among netizens, which had been reinvented and become a derogatory label attached to those supporting the relaxation of control. Anti-opening camp harshly criticized the "lying-flat faction" for their "lack of conscience",

who were “mice in the sewer” undermine the pandemic control efforts. Some communicators went further condemned those opposing lockdowns as “harbouring ulterior motives” to derail the government’s policy and “sowed the seeds of chaos” in society, corresponding to the presence of “denouncing traitor” nationalism theme. Crucially, “anti-opening camp” was careful not to direct their criticisms towards the central government but remained wholeheartedly pro-regime. When official media’s signalling made the relaxation of controls seemed inevitable, a post widely shared by anti-opening camp wrote: “Our nation has done all her can to protect you for three years. Now you are on your own.” Despite disappointment, they still reminded the public of the state’s pandemic control efforts.

“Pro-opening Camp”: Paving the Ground

Policy-wise, the “pro-opening camp” aligned closer with the central government’s position, which soon decided to proceed with relaxing pandemic control measures after the protests. Their confident and upbeat narrative style contrasted sharply to the nervousness and intensity from anti-opening camp. Pro-opening camp welcomed the prospect of relaxing control and returning to normal life. For example, Hu Xijin wrote more than once that it was “encouraging and exciting” that China was about to enter a “new normal” in pandemic control. Lu Kewen expressed that “good days are lying ahead”, while Sima Nan expressed the hope for “light at the end of the tunnel”. The encouraging messages also functioned as a form of integration propaganda, which heralded a bright future by sticking to the current path (Ellul 1965: 75). The frequent appearance of the term “new normal” is noteworthy, indicating the influence of this official parlour in popular propagandists’ narratives.

For pro-opening camp, “new normal” in pandemic control was brought forth by the government’s wise decision, the public’s wish for changes, the changing nature of the virus and China’s advanced pandemic control capabilities. The government, they argued, had gained a “renewed and sophisticated understanding” of the virus and learned “ample experience” in the past three years’ fights against pandemic. Therefore, it was in the best position to decide “the best way forward” in the country’s future pandemic control. Official actors, such as National Health Commission, and official documents were frequently cited to consolidate their position. Particularly, the official document “*20 Points on Improving Pandemic Controls*” (*jinyibu youhua yiqingfangkong de ershitiao cuoshi*, 进一步优化疫情防控的二十条措施) and “*Guiding opinions on the Pandemic Control*” (*guanyu yiqing fangkonggongzuo de zhidaoxing yijian*, 关于疫情防控工作的指导性意见) were highlighted in their narratives (Gov.cn 2022). The requirements of “lifting restrictions and lockdowns in a timely manner” and calls for “normalization of epidemic controls by ditching excessive measures” were echoed by pro-opening camp.

The frequent mention of official lines renders the pro-opening camp a faithful transmitter of the official line to the public, corresponding to traits of vertical propaganda, which emphasizes the top-down transmission of government policy (Ellul 1965: 80). Compared with the anti-opening camp, which was no less pro-regime, the narratives from the pro-opening camp were markedly less nationalistic, reflected by the lack of the “statism” theme. Contrary to their upbeat rhetoric in envisioning the “normal life” in the future, their propositions of relaxing controls were framed in a cautious tone. As Hu Xijin wrote, “the fight against the pandemic would definitely continue, only through different approaches and tactics”. Despite the official signals

of relaxing controls, the pro-opening camp avoided “outperforming” such signals or being overly optimistic. Transmitting official lines and addressing the public’s pandemic control fatigue, the pro-opening camp was by no means performing an easy task. A substantial proportion of the public were fearful contracting the virus, and the shift of a three-year-old long policy was likely to cause disturbance. Unlike a major political crisis or emergency that requires short and acute communication, such as agitation propaganda, the pandemic management is a “sociological” issue that requires milder and more subtle form of communications. Therefore, the way pro-opening camp takes to defend their positions and dismiss criticisms appeared more rational and polite than that of anti-opening camp.

On top of citing official lines, pro-opening camp also took advantage of the popular dissatisfaction towards “Zero-Covid” to support their position. They highlighted the inconvenience brought by draconian control measures such as prolonged lockdowns and endless mass-testing, criticizing local governments for poor policy implementation and insensitivity to the policy shift, corresponding to the noticeable presence of “critical nationalism” nationalism theme. One of the most popular posts from Hu Xijin criticized Jinzhou government (a municipality in Liaoning province) for its refusal to renounce the “Zero-Covid” approach. Hu criticized Jinzhou government for being “out-of-date” and “lacking understanding of the Omicron variant”. He cited official documents published by NHC and State Council and reminded Jinzhou to “follow the correct path.” Despite his frank and straightforward criticisms towards local governments, Hu retained his “political correctness” by faithfully reiterating the central government’s positions.

As a matter of fact, narratives of critical nationalism were mostly limited to the aspect of policy implementation at the level of local government. Few dared to mention the impacts of the sudden policy shift or the overall decision-making of the central government, except for KLLF, who sarcastically comparing the government's Covid policies as a "bus" driven by someone not knowing the direction. The harshest criticisms from pro-opening camp were directed at non-governmental actors, echoing with news reports of testing companies which faked positive test results in order to prolong the lockdown (Zhang 2022). Pro-opening camp lambasted on them as "black-hearted enterprises" (*heixin qiye,* 黑心企业) who "profited out of national disaster" (*fa guonancai,* 发国难财). Such criticisms both echoed with public sentiments and distracted them away from criticizing the central government, who was ultimately responsible for making such policies.

In contrast to anti-opening camp, pro-opening camp showed tolerance towards those holding different opinions on pandemic control, demonstrated willingness to engage with them and acknowledge their concerns. Hu Xijin even stated that "I am prepared to catch the virus" and reassured his audience that "For sure most of you are younger and healthier than I am." The invoking of his own persona demonstrated his determination in persuading the public. Unlike their rivals who degraded people holding opposing views, pro-opening camp refrained from name-calling or labelling their rivals as "unpatriotic". Reacting to the "lying-flat" label, they rejected a dichotomy between "lying-flat" and "excessive controls" and clarified that they were supporting a different approach of pandemic control to deal with the ever-changing reality. "Everyone should shoulder the responsibility for their own health", a quotation

from official media Xinhua's editorial (Xinhua 2022), were frequently referenced to consolidate their position.

Discussion and Conclusion

The anti-lockdown protest was barely discussed by popular propagandists. When they did, they fiercely denounced the protestors and resolutely support the government with virtually no sympathetic accounts towards protestors. This contrasts the finding that popular protests are receive more positive and sympathetic coverage in China in recent years (Steinhardt 2015: 113). Rather than acknowledging public's grievance, popular propagandists were unanimous in branding protestors as "unpatriotic". I argue that the lack of sympathetic accounts in protest-narratives lies in the nature of the event and the content producers. Anti-lockdown protests, though not fundamentally different from livelihood-centred protests, involved higher stakes as the Chinese government had attached great significance to pandemic management as a pillar of its legitimacy. As argued by Schneider in her research of Chinese state's "emotional governance" on Covid-19, the Chinese state's excessive "flagging" of the nation and national symbols in pandemic-related narratives risks "disruptive interventions into the emotional structure that fuel the state's nationalist project" (Schneider 2019: 318). Further aggravating its problems were some protestors' direct challenges to the regime and top leaders, which were bound to meet with harsh clamp down in China (Chen 2021).

Moreover, popular propagandists are different from mainstream new outlets. As argued by Zhang and his colleagues (2023: 267), the ultimate goal of Chinese state media's report on contentious issues is to mitigate the disturbance and maintain the status quo. As self-made strategic communicators, however, popular propagandists

aim to maximize the attention they could attract within the permissible range. In this case, their proclaimed "statism" messages pledging loyalty to the central government provides a safety net for their discussion of such a sensitive issue as protest which could generate great views and engagement. Last but not least, the growing assertiveness in official nationalist expressions under Xi Jinping (Zhao 2021) may contribute to the harsh rhetoric of popular propagandists. As the intermediary level, popular propagandists responded to the assertive turn in official nationalism by becoming more intolerant towards dissenting views.

Popular propagandists' engagement with anti-lockdown protests is "new wine in old bottles". It is "old" in the sense that they largely follow the existing narrative patterns when covering propaganda, including calling for stability, denouncing protestors and blaming "foreign interference" (Zhang et al., 2023: 277). It is "new" in that their non-official status allows them more vulgar, aggressive, and conspiratorial expressions. Particularly, the accusations of Hongkongers as "saboteurs" is a new development worth attention. It is an indication that the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democracy protest has become a "settled" issue in the PRC's cybersphere (Yang 2023), interpreted as a textbook example of (failed) attempts of foreign interference instigating riots and instability. The hostility against an imagined "Hong Kong interference" suggests the growing tensions between mainland nationalists and Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, and the renewed sense of paranoia and intolerance in China's (cyber) nationalist narratives.

Despite the uniformity on anti-lockdown protest, substantial disagreements appeared on pandemic control. This finding explains why popular propagandists were simultaneously supportive and critical of the government as reflected from the code

quantification. The seemingly contradictory attitudes were directed at two different issues. They were staunch supporters of the government on the issue of protests but appeared more critical when discussing the pandemic management. The failure to reach consensus on such a crucial issue as pandemic control and the division into two evenly matched camps can be explained in two ways.

First, it indicates that pandemic control was not a "settled" issue and had greater room for public debates. As a "deliberative democracy", China tends to allow free debates on some domestic policy issues (excluding those concerning critical areas such as national economy or Party affairs) before consensus is reached at the official level (Fishkin et al., 2010). The contrasting views held by popular propagandists and the debates thus generated allowed the government to gauge into online public opinions and make necessary policy adjustments.

Second, popular propagandists' disagreement was likely related to the divisions in both the official and the grassroots over Covid-19 management. As the intermediary level between the official and the grassroots, popular propagandists have to carefully navigate through the complex power relations between different actors. The central government's signals for relaxing control and local governments' resistance towards lifting restrictions fuelled the confusions and diverging views among the public. Popular propagandists might choose either side to maximize their appeals to those holding similar views.

Despite their disagreements, I argue that both camps' Covid-related narratives represent integration propaganda, albeit in different ways. Pro-opening camp stressed their alignment with the central government and psychologically prepared the public

for the policy shift. They avoided criticizing the central governments on its record of the inflexible “Zero-Covid” approach and the abrupt policy shift. Anti-opening camp highlighted the effectiveness of the “Zero-Covid” approach and criticized their rivalry views on the ground that a chaotic reopening would undermine regime legitimacy. Though opposing lifting control, they refrained from directly challenging the central government.

The two camps displayed drastically different narrative styles. While pro-opening camp rationally communicated with their audience, anti-opening camp’s rhetoric appeared highly emotional. The former represented rational propaganda which tactfully guided public opinions and paved the way for further change in pandemic control policies. The latter, resembling irrational propaganda, provided an emotional “sanctuary” for the concerning public, which helped to divert and contain public anger in a manageable way. The contrasting views were a result of the state’s confusing signals and divided public opinions on pandemic control. As a whole, messages related to Covid management functioned as integrational agenda, which calmed the concerning public, enhanced social trust and promoted social cohesion.

To sum up, popular propagandists behaved rather differently facing two inter-related events happened in the same period. The issue of anti-lockdown protest received little engagement, but the messages appeared highly uniform in their pro-regime and anti-protestors attitudes. In contrast, the issue of Covid-19 management received high level of attention from popular propagandists and led to vibrant debates between two evenly matched camps. The communication styles of the two camps vary substantially, with pro-opening camp appeared more rational, tolerant and optimistic while anti-opening camp more aggressive and emotional. This case, along with the Pelosi case discussed

in Chapter Six, have revealed quite different patterns of the propagation of cyber nationalism in a predominantly domestically focused issue and a geopolitical event. The two cases do share one similarity though, as both have received high level of attention from popular propagandists. It remains to see whether and how the propagation pattern changes in a case involving less stakes. The next chapter turns to the “Wandering Balloon” case, which, notwithstanding its importance, received less attention from popular propagandists.

Chapter Eight: The "Wandering Balloon"

Introduction

Background

Can a small balloon significantly derail Sino-US relationship? On 2nd February 2023, Billings Gazette, a local newspaper in the US state of Montana, published a picture of a "surveillance balloon" from China which, according to Pentagon, was very likely to be collecting information from "sensitive sites" (Billings Gazette 2023). Facing mounting pressures from Republican lawmakers, media and society, the Biden administration, despite repeatedly downplaying its risks and citing the potential damages caused by its shootdown (Borger 2023), finally decided to shoot it down on 4th February when the balloon reached the US East coast.

The Chinese government's reaction to the incident went from reticence to fury. Reacting to the incident on 3rd February, MoFA spokesperson Mao Ning expressed "regret" for the incident but stressed that the "balloon" was an "airship" of "civilian use" for scientific purposes. Its mis-entering into the US's airspace was by virtue of "force majeure" caused by seasonal winds and its "limited self-steering capability" (MoFA 2023a). When speaking with the US Secretary of State Blinken, Wang Yi, China's diplomatic tsar, increased his assertiveness and stressed that China "would not accept any groundless attack, smear or hype" (MoFA 2023b). The US's decision to shoot the balloon down enraged China. Vice Minister of MoFA Xie Feng lodged "stern representations" to the US embassy, opposing the "overuse and misuse of force" and vowing to "guard China's interest and self-esteem" (BBC China 2023a). Responding to the bipartisan resolution condemning China's violation of the US's

airspace, MoFA spokesperson Wang Wenbin on 13th February shifted the blame back to the US, claiming that it had violated China's airspace for "more than 10 times" since 2022 without providing evidence (MoFA 2023c).

Case Selection Rationale

The case is selected for the following reasons. First, it brings fresh insights on Sino-US relationship, which is the most important bilateral relationship in the world nowadays (Yan 2010; Lampton 2013). This event happened at a sensitive time for the two countries. Before the incident, Sino-US relationship had been deteriorating since Donald Trump's presidency. Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 further deteriorated the bilateral relationship. The balloon incident rescinded the initial efforts of the two sides to stabilize relationship following Joe Biden and Xi Jinping's sideline meeting during APEC in November 2022. In relation to the propagation of cyber nationalism, this case study builds on previous literature on how China's (online) public opinion engages with, responds to and influences foreign policymaking (Zhao 2013; Weiss 2014; Shirk 2007) and sheds new light upon the narratives produced by popular propagandists as nationalistic online key opinion leaders. Second, the balloon incident represented an awkward moment for China's diplomacy, since its infringement upon other country's airspace went against its self-claimed "responsible stakeholder" image and the principle of respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity (Dai & Luqiu 2022: 269). Making such mistake in front of its major rival only worsened the case. Facing a major diplomatic crisis, it remains to be seen whether the propaganda style appears integrational by cooling down the overheated public sentiments and defending the regime, or agitational by advancing the anti-US agenda. In relation to nationalism, I aim to examine how popular

propagandists, in a case reflecting China's diplomatic mistake, instead highlighted anti-foreign messages in their communication.

Regarding this thesis's research question, the Wandering Ballon case can illuminate how cyber nationalism is propagated in a case that does not involve China's "core interests" and receives lower level of attention from popular propagandists. Notwithstanding the importance of China-US rivalry, the balloon case as a geopolitical event contains lower stakes than, for example, Pelosi's Taiwan visit that challenged China's sovereignty. Though the "sovereignty" factor was involved in the Balloon case, China was not defending its own sovereign rights, but in fact violating the US's sovereignty. Notwithstanding its relatively low propaganda warming (Edelstein 1997: 9), the Balloon case is unlike the anti-lockdown protest which belongs to "taboo" in China's discursive fields. These differences render the case a useful comparison and further contribute to the sub-question of how cyber nationalism is propagated on political events of different natures.

Research Approach

The communicative activities of popular propagandists, who are nationalistic key opinion leaders active on the platform of Sina Weibo, lie in the centre of my overarching research question of the propagation of cyber nationalism. Theoretically, examining their narratives is key to the understanding of China's total propaganda that permeates into people's everyday life, and the expressions of China's intermediary level of nationalism situated between official nationalism and popular nationalism. Quantification of codes set out in Chapter Five has shown heightened anti-foreign nationalist expressions on this case, though it received less engagement and elicited

less sophisticated propaganda and nationalism profiles compared with the other two cases. Apart from the controversy around the surveillance balloon, preliminary analysis also shows that the news of chemical leak caused by a derail accident in Ohio also caught popular propagandists' attention. Therefore, discussions of the Ohio derailing accident, especially those with in relation to the balloon episode, are also included in the analysis. Using thematic analysis, the textual analysis provides an in-depth reading on the contents produced by popular propagandists and identifies distinctive narrative patterns which are the carrier of emergent nationalism themes and propaganda tactics.

Findings

Coding results reveal that the overall level of engagement with this issue is lower than that of the Pelosi visit and the pandemic management. Apart from "expressing opinion" and "informing", the propaganda tactic "neologism" has a large presence, which is a typical characteristic of "new propaganda". Regarding nationalism themes, both "anti-foreign" and "national pride" have a noticeable presence, followed by "denouncing traitor". The textual analysis reveals five discernible narratives patterns from popular propagandists, including the use of humour and sarcasm, shifting blames to the US, celebrating China's superiority over the US, attacking the US based on the derailment accident, and suppressing reflexive voices.

Humour, Sarcasm and Neologism

The most striking feature of the case, as this Chapter title suggests, is the renaming of the political event by Chinese netizens as "Wandering Balloon" (*liuliang qiqiu*, 流浪

气球). The event coincided with the release of the home-made sci-fi blockbuster *Wandering Earth 2*, whose name inspired the neologist reinvention. In other words, Chinese netizens' interest in this event went beyond its immediate context as a geopolitical event by making associations with the trending popular cultural products. The home-made movie portrayed China as the saviour of the humanity and became an epitome of national pride. Though the storyline of "wandering balloon" was a far cry from that of the movie, the phrase was consistently used by various communicators from official media to ordinary netizens throughout the event, and popular propagandists played a key role in its dissemination. The neologist reinvention, a key dimension of "new propaganda" (Edelstein 1997: 16), was not a top-down appropriation of popular cultures in propaganda work, a practice frequently adopted by (semi)official actors (Guo 2018; Yin & Flew 2018), but a grassroots reimagination of a diplomatic crisis by drawing parallels to trending cultural products.

Although not openly defending China at the initial stage of this incident, popular propagandists appeared far less apologetic than the official actors who at least followed the formality of expressing "regret". Instead, popular propagandists' initial reactions were light-hearted jokes about the US's "overreactions" as a "frightened bird" (*jinggongzhiniao*, 惊弓之鸟) who "took all bushes as bugbears" (*caomu jiebing*, 草木皆兵). Reposting a US news report blaming China's intrusion, Hawk wrote that "They acted as if China has already occupied the US." The shootdown of the balloon angered popular propagandists, a point to be further explored in the following sections. The light-hearted joking during the initial stage turned into sharper sarcasm underlying increasing anger and hostility. The US's decision to send out F-22 Fighters, one of the most advanced types in the world, became a new reference point for popular

propagandists to mock on the US's overreaction. The move received various sarcastic interpretation including "Terminators playing shooting games at a funfair", "hitting mosquitos with rockets" and "giving more parts to an actor than she deserves" (*jiaxi*, 加戏). Jin Canrong even wrote a doggerel based on the poem *The Beautiful Lady Yu*: "I ask you how much sorrow you have? You replied to me by sending F-22 to shoot down balloons". The US was seen as a "paper tiger" by intentionally flexing its muscle. Besides satires, communicators who often posted military and security analysis, such as KLLF and Jin Canrong, also wrote in great details to dismiss the strategic importance of F-22 as one of the most advanced weapons. In this case, a combination of rational propaganda based on demystification of the fighter jet and irrational propaganda based on sarcasm of the US's bluffing (Ellul 1965: 84-87) were in play to downplay the threats posed by a major rival.

Moreover, the ridicule of the US in effect rejected the notion that China had any responsibility whatsoever over the balloon's transgression. Strict censorships force many online political discussions to disguise themselves under the humorous and sarcastic rhetoric (Yang & Jiang 2015). For official actors, adopting humour and embracing popular cultures in political communication can achieve better resonance with the public (Guo 2018; Zhao & Lin 2020). I argue that popular propagandists' initial mocking of the US without explicitly defending China was a strategy both in pursuit of better popularity and testing the official attitudes. Different from Pelosi's Taiwan visit which left few rooms for alternative views, the balloon incident came with greater unpredictability and popular propagandists had to beat around the bushes and waited for its evolvement. The humorous and sarcastic narratives "depoliticized" the issue and downplayed the negative implications associated with China's intrusion

into other countries' airspace, serving the function of integration propaganda. It also highlights the distinctive anti-US messages to mock its "overreaction" over the incident, a practice implicitly shifts the blame towards the US.

Shifting Blame

The balloon's shootdown increased the hostility from propaganda propagandists and further intensified their anti-US narratives. Different from the euphemism at the initial stages, more actors categorically denied China's responsibility and shifted the blame towards the US not only for its "exaggerated reactions" but also for its being the "king of spying". The US's reluctance in taking the final decision was interpreted as having "guilty feelings" due to "judging China against its own standard", indicating that the US was the country behind a vast global espionage network. For example, the US State Department spokesperson Ned Price's claim of "China has such balloon projects in over 40 countries" (Pamuk et al., 2023) was interpreted by popular propagandists as "a piece of information collected by spying on other countries". The blame-shifting narratives featured whataboutism, a propaganda tactic responding to criticisms with countercriticisms rather than self-defence. The tactic is widely adopted in China's international communications in recent years, especially facing foreign criticisms towards its handling of Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Burcu & Wang 2023: 425). The US as the "king of spy" also had a solid public opinion basis in China, thanks to its media's tireless promotion of WikiLeaks, PRISM and relevant conspiracy theories over the years (Zou 2022: 235).

Popular propagandists' blame-shifting towards the US did not restrict to the realm of espionage but extended to all-out criticisms towards the US society, which was

dominated by “hostile and anti-China sentiments”. Some communicators cited Biden administration’s initial “restraint” on this matter and blamed the Republicans and the media as the “agitators of anti-China narratives”. As a result, US public opinion had been “hijacked” and “lost its objectivity under the zero-sum bi-party politics”. Noticeably, Hu Xijin went further and promoted all-out anti-US sentiments by calling on the Chinese people to ditch “objective, rationale, neutral” attitudes when judging the US, in response to the “systematic and pernicious smearing of China” from its society. Hu’s narratives were echoed by Lu Kw, who remarked that “the anti-China agenda” had become a “consensus” in the US. He compared the US’s anti-China attitudes towards its anti-Soviet project in the 1980s which was “either you or me” and urged Chinese people to “renounce illusions and prepare to fight against the US”. Such anti-US narratives agitated China’s public anger and channelled it towards the whole US society, a practice going against the official China’s long-held principle of “separating people from government” when airing anti-US propaganda (He et al. 2012).

Neologism and the references to popular cultures still had an active presence in the blame-shifting narratives. Apart from *Wandering Earth 2*, another trending TV series *The Knockout* (*kuangbiao,* 狂飙) was frequently cited in popular propagandists’ criticisms towards the US. The mafia-busting series reflected Beijing’s drive for “national crackdown on gang crimes” (*dahei chue,* 打黑除恶), and won widespread public praise as the pioneering anti-corruption series *In the Name of the People*

(*renmin de minyi*, 人民的民意)[12]. Coinciding with the balloon incident, the latest *Knockout* episode involved a plot where the mafia boss Xu Jiang insisted that his son, who actually died from electrofishing, was killed by his enemies as a revenge. The plot was reconstructed by popular propagandists as the metaphorical weapon for their anti-US narratives. Shen Yi, the culture-savvy lecturer, invented the coined phrase of "Xu Jiang effect" to describe the US's "paranoia". According to him, Xu Jiang was the "personification of the US", who got accustomed to "attributing all his mishaps to others" because he was a great villain who had always committed such atrocities to others. The manufactured association between the fictional crime lord Xu Jiang and the US deepens his audience's assumption of "evil US". Going beyond the immediate context of balloon incident, popular propagandists' reference to the popular TV series was another example of how the cultural hegemony of the Chinese state can be constantly reproduced on the grassroots (Yin & Flew 2018). The TV series saw its original message of "crackdown on gang crimes" reproduced by popular propagandists and gained the new meaning of anti-US hegemony.

In short, popular propagandists commonly adopted whataboutism to shift blames back to the US and alleged it as the chief culprit behind a globally engineered spying scheme. The blame-shifting narratives extended to enlarged anti-US narratives targeting the entire US society and projected an all-out confrontation between China

[12] Both *The Knockout* and *In the Name of the People* are examples of recent years' new propaganda drives witnessing the collaboration between official actors and private sectors, involving Party-state institutions including the CPC's Central Political and Legal Affairs and Supreme People's Procuratorate. Both have achieved huge success, especially In the Name of the People, which ranked the first of the recent decade's Chinese TV dramas (youth.cn 2016).

and the US. Various popular cultural products were cited to increase the appealing of propaganda messages.

Celebrating Chinese Strength and "Declining US"

Though deploying the blame-shifting narratives, popular propagandists were not afraid of directly responding to the US's accusation of espionage. Noticeably, such narrative patterns increased substantially after the balloon was shot down by the US. Compared with defending China's record, more words were spent on portraying a "declining US" and celebrating China's rising power, corresponding to the presence of "national pride" themes observed from code quantification. Some popular propagandists appeared more assertive than others and used this opportunity to assert China's superiority over the US. For example, Hu Xijin dismissed the US's criticisms of China's "irresponsible behaviours" in a simple "So What?", followed by the touting of China's military and technology supremacy and provocations towards the US:

> *"Even if this is a technical failure, we are still well-ahead of most nations in developing unmanned airship technologies……. China does not rely on balloon to collect intelligence from the US. The US better watch out our reconnaissance satellites – They are no less advanced than those made by the US."*

Strikingly, Hu not only praised China's advanced satellite technology but indicated that it was only a matter of willingness if China wanted to spy on the US, a provocative gesture that went against Chinese government's consistent denial of espionage (Tiezzi 2014). Hu's attitudes were shared by Shen Yi, who argued that the "Eagle" (the US) now realized that it was within the reach of the "Rabbit" (China), in a neologist reinvention based on the nationalist animation *Year Hare Affairs*. His provoked the

US via a symbolic "@" function directly calling out at the US Embassy's Weibo account and asked it to prepare to receive "East Wind Delivery" (*dongfeng kuaidi,* 东风快递), a neologist phrase referring to China's DF missile. Considering the information environment and his target audience, Shen's "call" for missile strikes should understood as a performance to feed to the nationalistic public, rather than proposing concrete military actions, or a signalling as Hu Xijin's "shoot her down" remark discussed in Chapter Six[13]. Factual information was intertwined with hypotheses in popular propagandists' narratives, coaxing their audience into a state of nationalism "fantasy" (Wu 2014: 250): The balloon was an accident caused by "apolitical" Westerlies, so China was not to be blamed. Yet the event was still a proof of China's superiority over the US, as its technological and military power had rattled the US.

On top of celebrating China's strength, popular propagandists also argued that this incident had exposed the US's weakness. The "decline" of the US received various types of descriptions from popular propagandists. Sima Nan, for example, condemned the US's as "primitive" nation with "warmongering personality", who followed "barbaric jungle principles" by "easily resorting to force". Adopting a humorous tone, Jin Canrong invoked the popular image of "James Bond" and contrasted a "young", likeable US as Bond in the past with its "old and fragile" image in the present. The personalization of the US plus the James Bond analogy added to the appealing power of his posts. For Sifen, the balloon incident was an "oracle" to hold the US back from its reckless behaviour because the "heaven" (*shangtian,* 上天) could not tolerate its

[13] Closer to the establishment and operating on X, Hu's provocative comments were directed at broader audience and carried more weights in the eyes of international observers.

"warmongering and hegemonic status". Invoking the phrase "the heaven" was an example of "cultural governance" (Perry 2017), where China's traditional culture served the purpose of propaganda. The "heaven" has been worshipped in China as a combination of religious and political authority (Zhao 2009) and entailed tremendous normative power, which added to the eloquence and persuasive power of Sifen's anti-US narratives.

The above accounts emphasized the "decline" of the US in the normative aspect as the world leader and the promotor for democracy and freedom. Some communicators specifically focused on the decline of the US's military power by deconstructing the process of the balloon's shoot down. For example, the unusually long time took by the F-22 Fighter Jets to successfully carry out its mission were interpreted as either as the equipment's poor performance or the US's incapability in mastering the weapon. Both Lu Kw and KLLF indicated that the US's air force "lacked appropriate coordination and leadership", without providing substantial evidence. For others, such as Hu Xijin and Sima Nan, the US's "muscle-flexing" act of sending out its most advanced Fighter Jets was nothing but a "forged show", only to conceal its loss of "unquestionable military supremacy". The undertone was that China should not worry about the US's military power as it had become a shadow of its past self. Moreover, it is the US, not China, that was blindfolded by the nationalist "fantasy" as it was still "living in its past" and determined to manufacture a "US triumph ending".

To sum up, popular propagandists reconstructed the diplomatic crisis which was supposed to expose China's own mistake into an affirmation of China's superiority over the US. A sense of national pride was promoted by a contrast between a rising China against a declining US. Their praise of China's advanced military and

technological power simultaneously functioned as a denial of China's act of "espionage" (in the sense that it has no need to use a balloon in spying activities) and a celebration of the country's strength. The US's overreaction was interpreted as concealing the decline both in its hard/military power and soft/normative power. Such narratives attest to the enduringness of the debate about whether China is ready to take over the US as the global leader among Chinese nationalists (Blanchett 2019: 151).

Distraction or Complementation? Reconstructing the Ohio Accident

When the balloon saga became a media sensation in both China and the US, a serious accident happened in the city of East Palestine in the US State of Ohio on February 3, when a train carrying toxic chemicals derailed. The accident sparked serious health and environmental concerns from residents, who also complained about the insufficient and delayed government responses (Noor 2024). Hardly having any relevance to China, the accident nevertheless received heated discussions in China. As of February 7, hashtags related to the Ohio accident had taken 4 of the top 20 trending issues on Sina Weibo. MoFA spokesperson Hua Chunyin wrote on X: "Apparently someone in the US has considered a civilian balloon as a graver threat to the public than a toxic chemical leak. #OhioChernobyl." Ms. Hua's reaction was an example of official actors' active engagement and reproduction of grassroots nationalist expressions (Sullivan & Wang 2023). Her post constituted part of the reproduction cycles of cyber nationalism, where popular propagandists played an active role in its reproduction and dissemination.

The timing for the Ohio accident's going viral on the Chinese Internet worth our attention. There was a time lag between the accident's occurrence and its surging

popularity in China's information environment. I argue that the accident was "rediscovered" to serve the discussion agenda of the balloon controversy. An examination of the "Ohio-related" posts from popular propagandists shows that the discussions were more than exposing some random negative news about the US. Instead, most posts associated the Ohio accident with the balloon controversy. While some would argue that the exposure of negative foreign news during a sensitive period is a strategy of distraction (Chitty 2004; Brady 2009), the attempts of juxtaposing the two incidents in the narratives suggested otherwise. In this case, the negative news was utilized as new grounds to manufacture fresh counterarguments and anti-US narratives in relation to the balloon controversy.

Criticisms specifically in relation to the incident targeted the US's insufficient safety management, failed industrial supervision and delayed governmental response. More words were spent on manufacturing the association between the accident and the wandering balloon. The US was portrayed as "intentionally hyping up" the balloon controversy while "keeping a tight lid" on the scandal of chemical leak. Such narratives criticized the US's "hypocritical freedom of speech", a typical strategy seen in China's anti-West propaganda (Burcu & Wang 2023: 425; Sullivan & Wang 2023: 81). DY, for example, wrote that "maybe for the US, a balloon flying high above its sky beyond reach is far more important than the poisons leaking on the land." Henghe, one of the most active communicators on the Ohio accident, referred to the New York Times' report on Feb 14 and questioned its efficiency: "It 'only' takes the newspaper ten days to report on such a serious accident. I wonder where their enthusiasm on reporting the balloon controversy have gone." Her criticisms of media efficiency were shared by Hu Xijin, who spoke in a video that "The incident should have received

more attention than the balloon, but the US elites have always been manipulating public opinions by controlling the media agenda." He further cited that only after ten days did EPA give a briefing on the incident and attacked the US's insincerity as a self-claimed global leader in environmental issues.

To sum up, the unexpected Ohio derail accident, coinciding with the wandering balloon episode, was "rediscovered" and reconstructed by popular propagandists to wage further attacks on the US. The US was accused of deliberately hyping up the balloon incident in order to distract its domestic audience away from its own domestic problem. Meanwhile, the accident was also utilized as a complement to the overall anti-US agenda to stage an ideological assault on the US with a specific focus on its "hypocritical" freedom of speech.

Quelling Dissent and No Reflections Allowed

The above four narrative patterns explained the presence of "anti-foreign sentiments" and "national pride" from the coding result. The presence of "denouncing traitor" nationalism theme corresponds to the "quelling dissent" narrative. As a country that often stresses the significance of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference, the Chinese balloon's intrusion into another country's territory, however "accidental" it might be, led some netizens to wonder whether China indeed made a mistake. Instead of echoing with these netizens and propagating critical nationalism, popular propagandists resolutely stood by the state and quell dissenting voices. Both Hawk and Sifen, for example, claimed that since China "has done nothing wrong", there was absolutely no need for Chinese people to "reflect". Jin Canrong responded to some netizens' call on him (and his alike) to be more objective by labelling them as a

"1450". The term was originally invented by Taiwanese netizens to ridicule those pro-government (pro-DPP) netizens, who are believed to be recruited under the DPP government's 14.5 million (Taiwan Dollar) bill as pro-government commentors. On the Chinese Internet, the term has undergone neologist reinvention as byword of those sympathetic towards Taiwan "Independence force". In other word, taking a reflexive stance on the balloon issue was no less grave than sympathizing with separatists and amounted to betrayal to one's Chinese identity. Shen Yi was also among the fiercest defenders of non-apologetic and non-reflexive attitudes. In an refute towards domestic "reflectors", he labelled such netizens as "worshippers of (American) hegemonic power". In short, questioning the righteousness of China was out of the question, and feeling apologetic was not only unnecessary but also problematic.

It turns out that the "denouncing traitor" nationalist messages were not restricted to the balloon controversy, but also in the context of the Ohio accident. A blogger with thousands of followers opposed celebrating the Ohio incident as an "online carnival", because it risked exposing China's own poor record of industrial safety control (Wu 2018). Though hardly critical of China but rather cautioning against potential public opinion backlash, the post inspired the reflexive voice towards the Ohio accidents, a perspective under fierce attacks from popular propagandists. Henghe adopted a sarcastic tone towards "reflectors", calling on them to persuade Ohio residents to "neither believe nor spread rumours" (*buxinyao buchuanyao*, 不信谣，不传谣), a phrase often used by Chinese officials when sensitive issues break out and the public are eager for answers. The phrase used to be deployed as a ridicule to Chinese government's intransparency, especially during the Covid periods when a series of policy mistakes led to the eroded public trust in the credibility of government publicity

(Davidson 2022b). Henghe's use of this phrase put it into a different context, not only criticizing the US but also ridiculing the government critics who used this phrase.

Shen Yi criticized the "reflectors" for holding "double standards" by being "lenient towards the US but critical of China". Hawk's posts contained harsh rhetoric by imposing the derogatory term "disposables" (*haocai*, 耗材) on dissenting voices. The neologist term was invented by cyber nationalists in tit-for-tat discursive battle against those believing "running away from China through migration at all costs" (*runxue*, 润学)[14], who in the former's eyes were relentless visa seekers working at minimum wage job. His name-calling dehumanized "reflectors" and suggested their bias and ignorance of China, who were as worthless as "disposables". Popular propagandists' denouncing of reflexive voice can be seen as extending the official nationalism's call for "struggles for public opinion" (*yulun douzheng*, 舆论斗争) to the grassroots and the cybersphere (Qian 2013).

To sum up, on top of an externally oriented anti-US agenda, popular propagandists also expressed internally oriented nationalism that actively quelled the reflecting voices. On top of denying China's responsibilities, they also demanded great public allegiance to their anti-US agenda and labelled those who refused to do so as unpatriotic.

[14] *Runxue* was a pun from the term "run". It has become a meme especially popular with the post-1990s generations who are feeling increasingly disillusioned with the reality in China and believing the only way out is to immigrate to a developed democracy, such as the US and the UK.

Discussion and Conclusion

The in-depth textual analysis reveals that popular propagandists reacted to a major diplomatic crisis with wholehearted support for the regime and all-out anti-US narratives. Reflecting on China's "mistake" was problematic and unpatriotic. They displayed savviness to trending cultural products and international news, and creatively appropriated them in their propaganda messages, the most striking feature being the phrase "wandering balloon". The great synergies generated between this event and popular culture is a signal of new propaganda. The humour deployed at the initial stage to some extent "depoliticized" this issue and downplayed its seriousness as a diplomatic crisis. It can be interpreted as a cautious act as popular propagandists were still testing the water around a nascent issue whose agenda had not yet been settled. The balloon's downing by the US and the hardened rhetoric from official actors paved way for the increase of "anti-foreign" nationalist themes, which manifest as blame-shifting narratives accusing the US of spying on China. Furthermore, the Ohio derailment accident was promoted both as a distraction from the awkward diplomacy crisis and complementing the anti-US agenda. The other two salient nationalism themes, "national pride" and "denouncing traitor", exemplified as celebration of China's rising power against the US's decline, and suppression of reflection of China's mistake.

Popular propagandists' intensive anti-US narratives were encouraged by the enduring anti-US sentiments and aggravated by the deteriorating Sino-US relationship The high-level Sino-US communication was effectively broken down, with no US cabinet member visiting China between 2018 and 2023. The 2021 Alaska meeting between the two countries' top diplomats, Blinken and Yang Jiechi, turned into a war of words

without reaching substantial agreements (Nikkei Asia 2021). President Biden's meeting with Xi during APEC in November 2022 brought slight hope in stabilizing the relationship. However, the positive trend was again derailed by the unexpected balloon incident, ended up with Blinken cancelling his visit. The tensions between the two nuclear powers brought great uncertainty to regional and even global stability, triggering concerns that the two countries were "at the brink of war" (Mandl 2023) or "collectively sleepwalking down a path of conflict escalation" (Roach 2023).

For China, the balloon incident not only dampened its rapprochement with the US, but also damaged its own image of "responsible shareholder", put its promise of respecting all nations' sovereignty into serious question. The incident coming at a time when increasing number of countries were casting doubt over China's alleged spying activities only worsened its global image (Bowler 2020). Popular propagandists appeared to care less about defending China's own international reputation than to utilizing the event to promote national pride and anti-US sentiments. None of them expressed even remote regret over the incident and instead blamed the US for increasing tensions, which is in line with the official position. However, they also went beyond official position by celebrate this incident as a proof of China's rising strength. It is also at this point that they departed from official rhetoric by indicating that China could, and would, spy on the US if necessary. This is another indication to show that the grassroots nationalist narratives often appear more belligerent and less disciplined than those of official nationalism (Gries et al., 2016). For popular propagandists, constructing the image of a powerful China matters more than a responsible one.

Though none of the popular propagandists felt even remotely apologetic towards its balloon's incursion into the US airspace, they displayed completely different attitudes

when the similar incursion happened in several Latin American countries. Most actors remained silent on this issue, and Hu Xijin even spoke in an apologetic tone and urged Chinese companies to improve its control capability to avoid such accidents and protect the country's international reputation. The drastic differences in popular propagandists' reactions towards similar accidents indicate the contingency of China's nationalist expressions depending which countries were involved. Unlike the US, Japan or Tawain, South American countries only occupy a marginal position in China's nationalism and are unlikely to trigger heightened irrational nationalist expressions.

Associating the Ohio accident with the balloon controversy served several purposes. To begin with, manufacturing associations between two supposedly irrelevant incidents not only distracted the public attention away from the undesirable implications associated with the balloon controversy, but also provided new ground for popular propagandists to stage fresh attacks towards the US. This strategy indicates the shrewdness of popular propagandists. Moreover, the narratives around such scandals have also formalized into different narrative patterns that target the US ideological, particularly on its "democracy" and "freedom" (Burcu & Wang 2023; Zhao 2021). It suggests that the production and dissemination of anti-US narratives have indeed become a "business" on the Chinese Internet, guaranteeing good readership (Lu & Pan 2020). What is particular about this case, however, is the creative utilization of a foreign scandal (Ohio accident) to serve another agenda (balloon accident). This finding indicates that the anti-US agenda has grown more sophisticated in popular propagandists' narratives.

Popular propagandists' denouncing of netizens who "admired the West" mirrors official propaganda's denouncing of liberal intellectuals. In 2014, an article from the Party mouthpiece Liaoning Daily criticized Chinese university teachers for being too critical towards China while admiring Western ideas (People.cn 2014). The article was followed by Xi's speech at a National Higher Education Party-building conference in December 2014 that demanded strengthening Party control and cleansing Western-inspired liberal ideas from universities (CPC News 2014). Mirroring official China's "overreach" in international affairs as being overly assertive (Shirk 2023), popular propagandists' inward-turning nationalism is also becoming increasingly irrational, combative and self-blinding. Amid the ideological struggles in the cybersphere, popular propagandists extended the scope of "liberal ideas" to include not only their expressions but also those narratives deemed as insufficiently patriotic. To quote an infamous line from former Tianjin Party Secretary Li Hongzhong: "Absolute loyalty means absolute loyalty, and there is nothing in-between" (CPC News 2016). I argue that the growing intolerance of cyber nationalism does not bode well for the China's (online) public sphere, where moderate voices have already been severely curtailed by the top-down pressures from the state (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015; Lei & Zhou 2015).). The bottom-up witch hunt will further discourage rational expressions and online deliberation.

Chapter Nine: Implications of the Empirical Research: Nationalism, Propaganda and Performativity

Introduction

The empirical study identifies popular propagandists, who are nationalistic online key opinion leaders active on China's social media platform, as a crucial force in the propagation of China's cyber nationalism. The qualitative content analysis of their posts reveals various propaganda and nationalism profiles from different communicators and political events. In this chapter, I shall link my empirical findings back to relevant theories and literatures, in particular those on propaganda and nationalism.

Popular propagandists' multifaceted online nationalist expressions are a result of the negotiation between varying demands and expectations of official and popular nationalism. Propaganda messages produced by them on different political events provide the much-needed empirical illustrations for the Ellulian typology of propaganda and revels the complexity between and within different types of propaganda. China's distinctive political culture problematizes the distinctions between new and old propaganda as theorized by Edelstein, and the communication activity of popular propagandists is an example of how popular culture can develop in tandem with, rather than in opposition to the authoritarian political culture. The three political events are also reviewed for their implications for China's domestic or foreign politics, as well as for their theoretical values in relation to the propaganda styles and nationalist expressions of popular nationalism. Last but not least, I examine the performative dimension of popular propagandists as an acknowledgment to their status

as strategic communicator on top of popular propagandist and nationalistic online opinion leaders.

The Complexities within China's Cyber Nationalism

Popular Propagandists as the "Intermediary" Level of Nationalism

Investigating the nationalist narratives of popular propagandists, this thesis contributes to the study of China's cyber nationalism by providing a detailed and comparative account of its composition. Popular propagandists' nationalist narratives represent part of, rather than the entirety of cyber nationalism. They fit into my proposed "narrow" definition of cyber nationalism as "online nationalist narratives mediated through the distinctive practices, rituals, languages and (sub)cultures of cyberspace". Compared with official actors or mainstream news outlets who also have an active online presence, popular propagandists appear more sensitive towards various forms of digital (sub)cultures and creatively incorporated them in their propaganda messages. Therefore, their down-to-earth, digital (sub)culture-savvy, popularized, playful and at times vulgar language style has more similarities to the expression of popular nationalism (Zhang et al., 2018; Deans 2005).

Judging from the salient nationalism themes thus expressed, popular propagandists' messages bear complex relations to both official and popular nationalism. Notwithstanding its popularized language style, the vast majority of popular propagandists' messages perform particularly weak on a crucial dimension of the bottom-up cyber nationalism, which is the critical view directed at state actors and the reflexive perspective towards "us", including both the communicator, nationalists and fellow countrymen (Min 2009). Although popular propagandists do express critical

and reflexive opinions, most of them are highly conditioned, extremely careful remarks incomparable to their boldness in denouncing foreign actors. No critical comments are made against the central government, specific leaders or the Party-state. Criticisms focus on the specific policy programs and their implantation, rather than the guiding ideologies or the rationale of the policymaking behind them. While popular nationalism tends to challenge the state for its perceived weakness against foreign threats (Weiss 2014; Shirk 2008: 79; Dean 2005) or reflect upon its mistakes in conducting diplomacy (Koschut et al., 2017: 488), neither was observed in the Pelosi case and the Balloon case, which contained the necessary triggers for such narratives. Though China's nationalist narratives are known for its pro-regime tendency when foreign actors are involved (Min 2009), critical nationalism regarding the pandemic management stopped short of exposing the fundamental problem lying in central government's problematic decision-makings. Moreover, when the narratives of popular nationalism and official nationalism are in clear confrontations, popular propagandists tend to side with latter, as reflected in their denouncements of the peaceful anti-lockdown protestors and their defence of the government in face of the Balloon diplomacy crisis.

It is equally problematic, however, to equate popular propagandists' narratives to those of official nationalism. Notwithstanding their overall pro-regime stance, statist messages do not dominate their nationalist narratives. Compared with narratives that tout the superiority of Chinese system or justifying the legitimacy of the CPC's leadership, popular propagandists spend more words criticizing foreign actors and undermining the liberal ideology, reflected from the largest presence of "anti-foreign" nationalism theme. They also display little interest in adopting official nationalism's

grand narratives (Brown 2017), as abstract terms such as the nation, the people, and the historical mission rarely appear in their narratives. Instead, they focus on specific political events, and commonly use simple and straightforward expression of nationalistic sentiments. Neither do they attempt to construct a comprehensive ideological system reaching the same level of sophistication as official nationalism. It is also on this aspect that popular propagandists' narratives differ from intellectual nationalism, not to mention their anti-elitist stance which often question the political correctness of intellectuals, whom they consider are too liberal. Moreover, though not necessarily an intentional move, popular propagandists can deviate from official lines, which put their positions in awkward tensions with official nationalism. I argue that such tensions are resulted from their misinterpretations of state policies or a risky gamble in exchange for greater sensations. Though to a far less extent than the untamed grassroots nationalists, popular propagandists remain an unpredictable force to the state whose communications could backfire and lead to a major online public opinion crisis (Zhang et al., 2024).

I conceptualize popular propagandists' narratives as representing the intermediary level of Chinese nationalism, whose nationalist expressions are impacted by both the official and popular nationalism. The influence from popular nationalism works on the "superficial level" in terms of narrative styles and topic focus. Operating in the fast-paced digital environment, popular propagandists need to appreciate and absorb various cultural trends and stay tuned for current affairs. The influences from official nationalism work intermittently and indirectly and may not be as observable as those from popular nationalism. Not necessarily adopting the same narrative styles or consistently communicating key themes of official nationalism, popular propagandists

are nevertheless subject to varying degrees of restraints by official nationalism depending on the nature of and the stakes involved in a political event. Far from a homogeneous group, they generally speak "freely" in everyday political communication with varying focuses and perspectives. However, when it comes to critical events involving hight stakes, popular propagandists are expected align with the official line and amplify pro-regime messages.

The Composition of Popular Propagandists' Nationalist Messages

The presence or absence of nationalist themes in popular propagandists' communications make new contributions to our understanding of Chinese (cyber) nationalism. Overall, the nationalism profile of popular propagandists is overwhelmingly dominated by anti-foreign sentiments. This finding affirms the importance of "other" as a key reference point in nationalist narratives (Billig 1995: 157; Muller 2008). In China's expressions, the presence of "other" manifest either as an ambiguous construct such as "the West", "the imperialist", "hegemony", or a specific foreign country such as the US or Japan, which are blamed for preventing China from pursuing its national interest or assuming its entitled status in the world (Kaulfman 2010: 9). Its significance also lies in its capability to mobilize the public anger towards a common enemy and generate greater cohesions (Mattingly & Yao 2022: 1582). Apart from referring to existing foreign "other" in their narratives, popular propagandists can also construct an "imaginary other" (Wu 2014: 247) or force certain groups to go through a process of "othering" (Wang & Burcu 2024), as they did during the anti-lockdown protest. to redirect public anger. This finding suggests that in order to generate greater cohesions, nationalist expressions can create

an “Other” in the absence of a concrete and discernible foreign Other during a domestic crisis.

The expression of xenophobic cyber nationalism has two dimensions. Facing a major geopolitical event, xenophobic nationalism can be used to agitate and mobilize public anger to signal the severeness to foreign actors (Little 2017) or to distract the public’s attention away from undesirable issues (Brady 2009b). Outside of the “eventfulness” of major political events, xenophobic nationalism has become part and parcel of popular propagandists’ everyday communications, and arguably part of China’s digital cultures. The ridiculing, belittling and mocking of foreign countries or foreigners have become a routinized practice on the Chinese Internet, driven by a combination of ethno-racial nationalism and realist authoritarianism (Zhang 2019). Popular propagandists play an active role in manufacturing the xenophobic “stereotypes, beliefs and reactions” to the public, aiming for “a total moulding of the person in depth” (Ellul 1965: 76). One of the examples of such mundane xenophobic nationalist expression is the so-called “zero-dollar shopping” (*lingyuangou*, 零元购) in the US, a phrase referring to Black people’s robbery of shops”. The phrase is a neologist creation fusing China’s E-commerce practices with international politics, whose dissemination and reproductions are intertwined with anti-US narratives and racist perspectives towards Black people. It is worthwhile to note the similarities shared by China’s xenophobic nationalist narratives with those of the West’s far-right populism (Zhang 2019). Anti-black, anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish racism is widely circulated by popular propagandists without much deterrence (Wang & Burcu 2024; CGSC 2021). Dismissal of plurality, diversity, liberalism and democratic system is also promoted with big fanfare (Zhang 2017).

Opposite to the outward anti-foreign narratives is the inward "witch-hunting" narratives against Chinese citizens who commit "unpatriotic" acts. China's cyber nationalism has long been a formidable bottom-up force to initiate nationalistic boycott against celebrities, companies, and countries for their perceived "insults" against China (Cha & Lim 2019; Pal 2009). Such hostility is becoming increasingly inward-oriented as China's public figures are subject to increasing public scrutiny for their unpatriotic behaviours, many of whom have been forced to apologize, "cancelled" or even jailed (Xu & Yang 2021). Popular propagandists have taken such "cancel culture" to a new height by creating a sense of paranoia and urgency in the grassroots, as if China is inundated with foreign spies and their collaborators. Their "witch-hunt" narratives indifferently target ordinary netizens as well as influential figures, as illustrated by the case of Mo Yan described in the Introduction chapter. Labelling someone as "unpatriotic" or "foreign admires" is also a tried-and-trusted tactic to refute their critics, as such criticisms significantly undermine one's credulity as an online content producer (Haung et al., 2018). The collective memories of China's "humiliation" suffered in the late 19th and early 20th form the historical basis for the unanimous condemnations against the unpatriotic betrayal of "Han Traitors" (*hanjian*, 汉奸). President Xi Jinping's repeated denouncements of Western liberal ideologies and emphasis of "ideological security" further emboldens such practices (Xu et al., 2022). It is not an exaggeration to consider the "witch-hunt" of cyber nationalism spearheaded by popular propagandists an ever-continuing Cultural Revolution in the cybersphere (Blanchette 2019: 104).

Few nationalism themes other than anti-foreign sentiments account for substantial proportions in popular propagandists' nationalist narratives, indicating the simplicity

of their nationalist propaganda. Blood lineage, Chinese race/nationality and Han supremacism, whose significance have been noted elsewhere (Sautman 1997; Lin & Jackson 2021), only have a minimal presence in popular propagandists' posts. The investigated political events' lack of triggering factors may explain their absence. Alternatively, popular propagandists are obliged to avoid certain topics in their communications, particularly regarding Han supremacism which risks damaging the "ethnic harmony" laid out in the official blueprint (Jia et al., 2012). Moreover, it is also possible that the racial factor is not always a determining feature of China's nationalist expressions. (See for example, Sullivan et al., 2023). Apart from the absence of the racial/ethnic narratives, militant nationalism featuring belligerence and aggression also has a marginal position in popular propagandists' narratives, which means popular propagandists appear far more conservative than intellectual nationalism and the practice of nationalist activists (Wang et al., 1999; Song et al., 1996). However, the surge of belligerent nationalism containing explicit calls for military actions when it comes to the Taiwan issue (as discussed in Chapter Six) is deeply concerning. The downplay of "peaceful unification" suggests the hardening of online public opinions towards Taiwan, and more people are becoming mentally prepared for the potential military conflicts in Taiwan Strait.

The prevalence of the xenophobia and witch-hunt nationalist narratives point to a grim future for China's public sphere which has already been severely curtailed (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015; Lei & Zhou 2015). Without meaningful challenges from alternative perspectives, nationalist narratives will have a disproportionately large influence in China's online discursive environment. On top of the bottom-up pressures of cyber nationalism, liberal and moderate voices have already been subject

to the top-down crackdown from the Party-state, which have silenced prominent critics such as the princeling figure Ren Zhiqiang and Tsinghua Law Professor Lao Dongyan (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015: 150). The restraints imposed on online public sphere mirror those in broader civil society, one of the most striking examples being the Xi administration's further tightening up of the Party's control over university and think tank based in China. Implementing the infamous Document 9's instructions to crack down on "mistaken views and ideas (in). . . public lectures, seminars, university classrooms, class discussion forums" and in the media and on the Internet (ChinaFile 2013; Fu 2024), the Party's General Office renews its warning and ordered legal theorists and educators to "firmly oppose and resist erroneous Western views" in 2023 (Batke 2023). The erosion of China's public sphere for anything other than nationalist orthodoxy do not bode well for a vibrant civil society where lively debates, contemplations and critical views are essential components. The unchallenged nationalism can also pose a challenge to the state by derailing the rational policymaking, undermining China's global image as a friendly country and deterring future foreign investments and people-to-people exchange (Weiss 2014; Shirk 2007, 2023). Recurring incidents of foreigners being stabbed in China recently and the regulator's vow to take down "hate speech" featuring "extreme nationalist expressions" on the Internet (Hawkins 2024) is a clear indication of the Party-state's growing uneasiness to the outrageous xenophobia circulating online.

Compared with "negative" nationalism themes that provokes, agitates and denounces "other", the "positive" nationalism themes that empower "us" account for a much smaller proportions in popular propagandists' narratives. Avoiding repeated praise-singing in everyday communications can reduce the public's fatigue over such

messages and add to their weight during critical moments (Zou 2023). The need for enhancing regime security during a sudden and sensitive political event calls for stronger cohesive messages (Edney 2015), which often go hand in hand with statism messages. The strong relevance between the two themes suggests popular propagandists' inclination to juxtapose national cohesion with the need of maintaining the CCP's legitimacy, a practice reproducing the Party's attempt to tie national security with regime security (Tsang 2020: 306). National pride, another crucial theme of "positive nationalism", was weirdly expressed through a reconstruction of geopolitical events where China suffered setbacks into a celebration of China's triumph in the Balloon case. Such expression of national pride is a typical example of the "victorious narratives" represented by Jin Canrong, one of the observed communicators, who claimed during an interview that China has "become numb and tired of its own victories" (*yingmale*, 赢麻了) (CDT n.d.). Situating national pride not in concrete achievements but in imagination, such narratives indicate the growing blindness and narrow-mindedness of China's cyber nationalism. The refusal of popular propagandists to admit China's mistakes stems the critical reflections from civil society and the "responsive authoritarianism" (Heurlin 2016) which relies on authentic public opinions in policy making.

To the extent that they are "flagging" and "indicating" the Chinese nation to the citizens, popular propagandists can also be seen as producing "banal nationalism" (Billing 1995: 11) through their everyday communications on Weibo. Their "intermediary" status between the official and the grassroots furthers our understanding of how banal nationalism is co/reproduced on the societal level by non-state actors. I agree with Billing that the investigation of nationalism should not only

be restricted to "periphery" actors such as rebels or far-right radicals, but also those in the "centre" as established nation state actors. For all their claimed "independent" status, popular propagandists perform as pro-regime commentators and their communications consolidate, rather than destabilize, the Chinese Party-state. What sets the "banality" of popular propagandists' nationalist narratives distinctive from their Western counterparts discussed extensively by Billing is a greater need to pay allegiance to the established official line ostensibly rather subtly due to China's authoritarian context, and the performative dimension required by the competitive digital discursive environment.

An Ellulian Perspective on Popular Propagandists

Revisiting Ellulian Propaganda: Typology and Variation

The empirical analysis has developed Ellul's original definition of propaganda as "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization" (Ellul 1965: 61) in several aspects. To begin with, popular propagandists are self-made, entrepreneur nationalistic online key opinion leaders who can hardly be categorized as an "organized group". Propaganda in China nowadays is no longer monopolized by organizations such as Central Propaganda Department or large media groups, thanks to the public's vibrant online content productions (Han 2018; Qin et al., 2017). Media entrepreneurship has empowered cyber nationalists to seek greater attentions and profits via their nationalist media entrepreneurship (Zhang & Ma 2023: 908). Not denying the importance of official actors and mainstream media, I argue that the future

of China's online propaganda will become further decentred and involve more grassroots actors other than official propagandists or professional media practitioners. Second, the peculiarity of the Chinese case also brings new insights on Ellul's understanding of propaganda as the "means for the conquest of power thanks to the support of psychologically manipulated groups or masses, or for exercising this power with support from the masses" (Larousse1975: *La grande encyclopédie*, 1975: 8985, cited in Marlin 2014: 192). For popular propagandists, it is not only the masses that matter to them, and they have to navigate through the complex power dynamics between the state, the public and their "colleagues". The Party-state expects them to play a role in its overall propaganda system, contribute their bits to its cyber governance, guide online public opinions and embody positive energies (CAC 2020). The top-down political pressure are to be balanced against the bottom-up expectations on them to be independent, frank and trustworthy, which are crucial benchmarks used by netizens to judge opinion leaders (Huang et al., 2018). When interacting with their "colleagues", popular propagandists seldom engage in direct debates or trade insults with each other, but they do have different views and make efforts to distinguish their communication styles from the other.

Political or Sociological? Between Everydayness and Eventfulness

Ellul has theorized eight different types of propaganda divided into four pairs, each composed of two contrasting types which operate in drastically different ways. The first pair consists of political and sociological propaganda. Political propaganda is carried out by specific groups of actors, who have clear political objectives. Sociological propaganda, on the contrary, does not require fixed actors to pursue specific goals via propaganda. The popularization of social media has made it easy for

ordinary Chinese citizens to achieve online influence, and media entrepreneurship has encouraged the burgeoning of we-media industry in China (Lagerkvist 2011). Popular propagandist as a "profession" welcomes the general public. Thus, considering its actor composition, popular propagandists display a closer resemblance to sociological propaganda by having volatile rather than fixed actors. However, one caveat is the disproportionate influence held by a small handful of actors (less than 10%), who have larger number of fans, elicit more active fan engagement and enjoy better platform exposure. This observation goes against the ideal model of sociological propaganda, which assumes not only equal membership but also equal influence between different actors in propaganda process (Ellul 1965: 64).

Whether or not popular propagandists follow a clearly defined political goals needs to be judged from the angles of everydayness and eventfulness. The everydayness angle looks beyond specific cases and considers popular propagandists' communications as part of online political discussions. In this sense, popular propagandists do not follow a pre-set, clearly defined goal but discuss a broad of range of topics beyond geopolitical issues. As argued by Ellul (1965: 66), the aim of sociological propaganda is to "create a fully established personality structure". By the same token, popular propagandists strive to establish how "patriots" should live and think, reproduce the Party's ideologies on the grassroots, such as positive energy and socialist core values, and facilitate the public's internalization of them (Gow 2017; Chen & Wang 2019). However, the emergence of various political events adds complexity to the picture, as they elicit different responses from popular propagandists. It is thus necessary to consider the eventfulness angle, which targets the propaganda messages of particular events. The empirical case study reveals that the involvement of "foreign force" who

has “insulted” China or challenged its core interests is most likely to transform the style from sociological propaganda into political propaganda. Under such scenario, popular propagandists are highly unified in establishing a hard line against a common enemy (the foreign “other”). Propaganda messages converge in their political goals and strictly adhere to the official lines in their perspectives by referring to key statements, policies or officially sanctioned blueprint.

Agitational or Integrational? Between Domestic and International “Status Quo”

The second pair consists of agitation propaganda and integration propaganda. The key difference between them lies in whether the propagated messages aim at challenging or maintaining the status quo. In his work, Ellul’s theorization of these two types of propaganda were largely confined to the domestic realm, as he discussed the need for a revolutionary party newly coming into power to transform its propaganda style from agitation to integration required by the new reality (Ellul 1965: 77).

Ellul’s original theorization went off mark with the context of this research. For one thing, China is by no means in a time of revolutionary turbulence or transition period but has been under the stable rule of the CPC for decades. Moreover, popular propagandists are pro-regime actors who are unlikely to challenge the status quo set by the Party. Empirical analysis has developed the understanding of the two types of propaganda. Integration propaganda is not restricted to messages that directly appeals to the public to support “stability” or touts its merits, but, in the case of China, more often emphasize the support for the leadership of the Party as following the “right path”. In the absence of meaningful election as democracies, the CPC relies heavily on propaganda to maintain its legitimacy before the public (Holbig & Gilley 2010;

Brady 2009). Thus, popular propagandists' integration propaganda usually features pro-regime messages and refutations against critical perspectives when the regime's legitimacy is called into question.

Regarding agitation propaganda, the presence of a significant foreign "other" remains a crucial trigger for challenging not the domestic but the international status quo, interpreted as the "US hegemony", "Western hypocrisy" and other forms of injustice standing in the way of China seeking a larger role on the global stage. By acknowledging the international dimension, I have extended the scope of Ellulian agitation propaganda beyond the domestic "revolutionary" period and incorporated geopolitical competition, where a revisionist power challenges the dominance of the incumbent power.

Vertical or Horizontal? Between Official Lines and Popular Demands

The third pair consists of vertical propaganda and horizontal propaganda. Writing in the 1970s, Ellul could not possibly foresee the advent of the Internet, which has drastically changed the media and communication landscape. The key determinant of vertical propaganda in the context of social media, therefore, is whether the communicators speak with their own voices or simply repeat the prescript official lines (Marlin 2014: 197). The high originality rate and diversified communication styles suggest that popular propagandists impress their audience as independent information sources rather than official mouthpieces.

The other key indicator of vertical propaganda is whether the communication features clear hierarchy, highlights or mystifies the role of a (few) strong leaders (Marlin 2014: 198). Overall, popular propagandists show little interest in promoting "the cult of

personality" towards Xi Jinping, a trend noted elsewhere (Luqiu 2016; Yin & Flew 2018). There were "exceptional moments", however, that demanded popular propagandists to unanimously pay tributes to a leader, such as the death of the former supreme leader Jiang Zimin. Moreover, a political event involving China's core interest increases the proportion of vertical propaganda by more frequent references to official lines. Most of such transmissions are done in an indirect way, complemented with individual commentary and interpretation, rather than the direct reposting of official sources.

On most occasions, popular propagandists' communication activities are more in line with horizontal propaganda, as each communicator forms their own online group with audience and reaches certain conclusions of their own (Marlin 2014: 197). The inter-group differences are key features horizontal propaganda, as popular propagandists are far from a homogenous group speaking with one voice on most occasions. Even when agreeing on a common end, different communicators may disagree over which the most desirable means to achieve it. These finding suggest that overall, popular propagandists enjoy autonomy in their communication activities free from the organizational constraints or direct interventions from state regulators. Their discussion agenda is nevertheless indirectly influenced by the state's policy priorities, as they are obliged to increase the transmission of official lines during critical political events.

Rational or Irrational? Between Spontaneous and Strategic Choices

The fourth and final pair consists of rational and irrational propaganda. Overall, popular propagandists display a preference over rational propaganda as reflected from

the level of sophistication of most posts, written in great length with abundant information and evidence. Just as Ellul argued, however, their dispassionate persuasion of rational propaganda is no less deceiving than, for example, an appeal to emotion (Ellul 1965: 85). Popular propagandists' presentation of facts, figures, charts are often dubious in their source or thoroughly misleading. Furthermore, I argue that the "irrational" expression is a crucial part of China's public sphere, where emotion (*ganqing*, 感情) has traditionally played a conducive rather than counterproductive role (Tong 2015; Kong 2014). The empirical analysis reveals that "irrational" expressions, manifested as sensational, aggressive, hyper-nationalistic, or even ridiculous or conspicuously far-fetched statements, are often preceded by the presence of a foreign "other" who threats China's core interests. China's discursive environment allows little room for civilised debates or rational reflections of such cases in public sphere (Blanchett 2019: 127). For popular propagandists, being "rational" on contentious issues risks damaging their "political correctness" and triggers backlash from their followers (as the anti-lockdown protest case suggests). Moreover, popular propagandists' status as the intermediary level between the official and the grassroots grants them more flexibilities in appropriating emotional expressions for different purposes. Their non-official influencer status allows them to signal to different audience via hyper-sensational comments without inflicting the same cost as official actors (Wu & Sevin 2023). In other words, being "irrational" can be either a spontaneous or a strategic choice for a communicator depending on circumstances. The complexity revealed from popular propagandists' communications suggests that it makes more sense to judge the sophistication of a

propaganda message, illustrated as the diversity of adopted propaganda tactics and expressed nationalism themes, rather than the benchmark of "rationality".

Coexistence or Competition? The Relationship between Different Propaganda

Scholars have called for more efforts in synergizing different forms of Ellulian propaganda (Tal & Gordon 2016: 187). Zhang and Cameron's paper is among the few works that attempts to classify and re-group the four pairs of propaganda (Zhang & Cameron 2004: 309). Political propaganda often works in tandem with agitation propaganda, both of which are more likely to be rational and vertical. They share the similarity of swift operation in communicating large volumes of information guided by a clear agenda. In contrary, sociological propaganda works more often with integration propaganda, appearing horizontal and irrational due to its imperceptible, long-term and gradual operation. Building on Chubb and Wang's (2023) argument of the compatibility of different theoretical explanations for authoritarian propaganda, I have further revealed a more complex picture between different types of propaganda based on my empirical findings.

While political propaganda tends to go hand in hand with agitation propaganda (as in the Pelosi case), it is also capable of accommodating integration propaganda. Facing a major geopolitical crisis, right-wing, ultra nationalistic and radical online commentators often blame the government for being weak and use provocative language to press the state into a harder line, such as the pro-war bloggers in Russia (Urman & Makhortykh 2022). This is unlikely to happen with popular propagandists, who are more disciplined pro-regime actors compared with their foreign counterparts. Instead, they use integration propaganda to re-interpret and "elaborate" upon the status

quo, defending rather than challenging the government's position. Such integration propaganda operating with political propaganda is unlikely to be irrational as theorized by Zhang and Cameron but appears highly rational guided by a clear agenda, which is to defend the regime. Moreover, agitation propaganda working with political propaganda does not always appear rational, especially when it is guided by an anti-foreign agenda, which can at times go too far and undermine the state's position (as the public opinion backlash in the Pelosi case discussed in Chapter Six). Regarding its relationship with vertical propaganda, political propaganda indeed contains higher proportion of official messages. However, the reproduction of official lines should not be interpreted as homogeneity in opinions, as popular propagandists tend to interpret the official positions in different ways. This finding indicates the possibility for greater variety of expressions under political and vertical propaganda.

Sociological propaganda, for its part, also proves capable of coexisting with both rational and irrational propaganda. The vibrant debates and clash of different perspectives (as in the case of Covid-19 management discussed in Chapter Seven) confirms its compatibility with horizontal propaganda. The peculiarity of the pandemic management case offers key explanations to this finding. The persistency of Covid-19 pandemic and Zero-Covid policy, as well as the issue's crucial position in official propaganda (Schneider 2021; Huang 2022), suggest its high degree of permeation into society. Contextualized as an issue of policy rather than ideological debate, pandemic control at the time of investigation had more room for rational debates. Half of the ten observed actors' resistance of embracing the official signalling of relaxing control is a surprising finding as they seemed to reject the integrational agenda of adapting the public to the potential policy shift. Nevertheless, I argue that

their messages still functioned as integration propaganda by reaffirming the success of "Zero-Covid" approach, emphasizing consistency in government's pandemic control and providing an emotional "sanctuary" for the concerning public. This finding further suggests that integration propaganda can function in different way, including the use of emotional expressions. Appealing to audience's emotions and sentimental expressions does not necessarily contradict the aim of integration propaganda, as long as they can adapt the mass to the status quo. How emotion works in China's public sphere needs to be discussed against its specific sociocultural context (See for example, Donald's (2000) work on theatre and public sphere in China and Lin's (2014) work on online public sphere).

Propaganda of Old, New or Something Else?

Should popular propagandists' communication activities be viewed as a form of new or old propaganda or a mixture of both? I argue that this question should be addressed on two dimensions. The first aspect is the emergence of popular propagandists as a phenomenon in itself, which is the nationalist media entrepreneurship of online key opinion leaders. The second aspect is the content produced by popular propagandists around specific political events.

The Emergence of Popular Propagandist as Nationalist Media Entrepreneurship

The key difference between old and new propaganda is whether the cultural background where it derives and operates encourages public participation (Edelstein 1997: 8). From this perspective, the emergence of popular propagandists is a form of

new propaganda. Their practices are influenced by digital cultures, cyber nationalism and media entrepreneurship. China's grassroots nationalists' adoption of the Internet as a medium to express themselves dated back to the 1990s (Li 2018: 15). The popularization of social media and smartphones has broadened the Internet access for ordinary Chinese people and empowered their online expression. As major nationalistic websites and BBS forums turned more official due to the state's regulations and interventions (Wang 2018: 55), grassroots nationalists have swapped for social media platforms whose participatory nature allows them more space and freedom to express less orthodox nationalist views.

Different from old propaganda which relies on mass media infrastructure to conduct asymmetrical communications, popular propagandists have to compete for online audience's attention. They have extra motivations to make their contents more appealing than professional propagandists who prioritize ideological requirements and Party lines (Zou 2023). Popular propagandists are also different from official actors who have made inroads into the cybersphere under the state's renewed framework of cyber governance (Creemers 2017). With rare exceptions such as Hu Xijin, the vast majority of them are self-made actors with no links to state apparatuses. The overwhelmingly grassroots backgrounds affirm the participatory nature of popular propagandists as a "profession" underpinned by media entrepreneurship.

Encouraged by the prospect of turning online traffic into profits and popularity, self-made media practitioners with varying levels of professionalism and resources have drastically changed China's media landscape, supplying the public with various kinds of information from celebrity gossip to serious political commentaries (Nip & Fu 2016). Poplar propagandists' communication activities contribute to this trend and

develop a new operational mode of nationalist media entrepreneurship whose unique selling point is disseminating and commenting on sociopolitical issues happening both home and abroad with nationalistic undertones. Different from other forms of media entrepreneurship China, this mode actively engages with, rather than steers clear of political issues, and turn online political discussions into a profitable enterprise.

As the site for popular propagandists' operation, the participatory nature of Sino Weibo is central to Edelstein's definition of new propaganda (Edelstein 1997: 4, 13). Different from the "one-to-many" communication model of old propaganda, new propaganda features a de-centred, "many-to-many" model that allows public participations in the co/reproduction and dissemination of propaganda messages (Repnikova & Fang 2018). This model allows popular propagandists to bypass mainstream media and set the discussion agenda of sociopolitical, in the sense that they can prioritize different topics and express various opinions. More importantly, their choice of Weibo reduces the distance between the author and the reader, allowing more frequent and closers interactions which is impossible for the asymmetrical old propaganda.

Though popular propagandists enlarge the scope of public participations in co/reproduction and dissemination of propaganda messages, several caveats caution against conceptualizing its operation as an ideal form of new propaganda. To begin with, it is impossible for popular propagandist to openly hold certain positions or communicate certain perspectives in China. Outspoken criticisms directed at the top leadership and the Party-state is out of the question. Equally subject to censorship and regulations as ordinary Chinese netizens, popular propagandists have to take extra efforts in proving their "political correctness" in response to bottom-up expectations

on their patriotic stance. Notwithstanding their divergence in perspectives, narrative styles and topic focuses, popular propagandists rarely display a commitment to an alternative ideological position other than nationalism, which can be pronounced as patriotism, socialism or communism. It is unlikely for them to promote feminism, pluralism or ideological positions that are often attacked as being too "liberal" or "Westernized" in China (Zhang 2017). This observation goes against Edelstein's argument that new propaganda can contribute to vibrant debates and competition between different ideas (Edelstein 1997: 15).

Moreover, although nationalist media entrepreneurship provides fresh opportunities for ordinary people, the landscape of popular propagandists is hardly a levelling playfield with several actors holding disproportionate influence over the others. Granted, a communicator's popularity is linked to their active fan base, consistent and timely content productions. However, several actors' enduring and disproportionate influence risks hijacking the group opinion, because less influential actors may simply jump on the bandwagon or self-censor their opposing views. As a result, it reduces the opinion diversity of the cohort, which is an important indicator of new propaganda (Edelstein 1997: 16) and turns the discursive field into a "monopoly" by several communication "giants".

Top-down pressure from the state's old propaganda and the intra-group complexities prevent popular propagandists from achieving the ideal model of new propaganda. Old propaganda manifests as the state's upgraded control of online information. The surging influence of online opinion leaders have caught the regulator's attention, who have responded with both coercion and co-optation. Liberal and reform-minded individuals were warned, silenced, or even put into jail, such as the outspoken CCP

critic Ren Zhiqiang (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015: 148). Those who are willing to cooperate are regarded as a crucial component of the Party's propaganda work and given a key role in "guiding" online public opinion (CAC 2019, 2020). I argue that popular propagandist is an example of such coopted individuals, as the vast majority of them do not challenge the regime, if not overtly propagating pro-regime views.

Apart from the top-down pressures, the amount of social capital and resources they could leverage is also key to their influence. Though most popular propagandists have built their online influence from scratch, figures like Hu Xijin, Shen Yi, Sima Nan and Jin Canrong are able to transform their existing social capital in the physical world into online influence. Furthermore, few influential popular propagandists operate as a "lone wolf". Their successful media entrepreneurship has either enabled them to build their own teams or earned themselves a position as a guest writer/commentator for think tanks or news outlets (Zhang & Ma 2023: 13). In other words, on top of one's own capabilities, the resources they can leverage upon impacts the quality of their content and their visibility on the platform. Such developments parallel the trends in the entertainment-oriented wanghong industry, which have gone through a transition from amateurism to professionalization that relies more on the capital and companies' promotion rather than individual efforts (Zhang & de Seta 2018). The increasing professionalization of popular propagandist disadvantages newcomers to this field, a trend at adds with new propaganda's promise of public participation.

Commenting on Major Political Events: Rethinking "Propaganda Warming"

The breakout of political events of high stakes provides a good opportunity for popular propagandists to attract greater attention and increase their popularity, but simultaneously pose a challenge for them to stay within the state's permissible boundary while doing the self-promotion. Comparing the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of popular propagandists' communication based on the empirical analysis reveals several important takeaways. Overall, popular propagandists are more willing to adopt neologism practices when they commented on major political events. Meanwhile, they also become less interested in airing pro-regime views but more likely to denounce "unpatriotic" behaviours. The shift in their narrative style towards a stronger indication of new propaganda suggests that major political event increases the synergies between politics and popular culture. Rather than drawing a clear line between "political" and "apolitical", popular propagandists intentionally blur the line between the pair when commenting on key political events. In a political culture where political apathy is prevalent (Zhang & Fagan 2016), drawing on the rich repertoire of popular culture in political commentaries adds to its appealing power and reaches broader audience.

What can be told from the varying salience of different nationalism themes in popular propagandists' messages is less straightforward. Downplaying overtly pro-regime messages can be a calculated communication strategy, since the public place more trust in independent and unofficial sources (Huang et al., 2018; Neagli 2021). Similarly, critical views are carefully formulated and expressed without targeting the

Party or the top leadership. Messages featuring critical nationalism diminishes when sensitive events involving high stakes break out, replaced by uniformed pro-regime messages. In line with Stockmann and Gallagher's (2011) findings, I argue that such controlled criticality increases popular propagandists' credibility as an independent information source without triggering censorship. Moreover, popular propagandists' criticisms not only targets foreigners but turns inward against domestic "traitors" and "unpatriotic" acts. I argue that the increasing "witch hunt" targeting Chinese citizens in effect defends the official position without ostensibly singing praise to it. Such practices also embody President Xi's call for "struggling for public opinions" (*yulun douzheng*, 舆论斗争) (Gang 2013), where popular propagandists play the vanguard role in carrying out such struggles on the grassroots, manifesting as harsher denouncements and greater intolerance towards dissenting views.

The three examined cases are concerned with different aspects of China's domestic issue and foreign policy. There are several key takeaways from the inter-case comparison based on a combined analysis of code and text in relation to theories of propaganda. First, I argue that the measurement of "propaganda warming" of a political event (Edelstein 1997: 9) should consider both the received attention and the diversification of propaganda messages. In this thesis, I measure the diversity of propaganda messages based on adopted propaganda tactics and expressed nationalism themes. The level of "propaganda warming" varies between different cases, with the Pelosi case reaching the highest level. It not only elicits the highest level of engagement from popular propagandists, but also the most diversified propaganda and nationalism profiles. By comparison, the other two cases fall behind in various aspects. Though receiving high level of attention, the Covid and protest case triggers far less

nationalistic messages than the other two cases. The anti-lockdown protest receives scarce discussions, whose sensitivity bars popular propagandists from active engagement. Regarding the Wandering Balloon case, it trails the other two cases in the attention received from popular propagandists. Its high proportion of nationalist messages is nevertheless dominated by the single theme of "anti-foreign sentiments" and lacks diversification.

Second, I argue that different dimensions exist when conceptualizing the political communications around an event either as old or new propaganda. Edelstein was inconsistent in his theorization, as he sometimes focused on the prominence of popular cultural expression, sometimes on the major driving forces being either governmental or civil actors, and sometimes on the results being either "cooperation or confrontation" (Edelstein 1997: 16, 288). Such holistic view is not conducive to a comprehensive understanding of popular propagandists' communications around a particular political event. This thesis's empirical analysis reveals that it is more common to observe divergence instead of convergence between different dimensions in determining old or new propaganda. For example, the Covid and protest case has amatter-of-fact narrative style with few references to popular culture. By contrast, the two geopolitical events' messages appear more colourful, with numerous references made to trending cultural products and frequent adoption of catchphrases. In other words, the Pelosi case and the Balloon case managed to generate more synergies between politics and popular culture (Edelstein 1997: 333) and display a stronger indication of new propaganda. Between the two, the Balloon case strikes a better chord with popular culture by taking advantage of the nationalist blockbuster "*Wandering Earth*" to reimagine the diplomacy crisis as China's triumph. In comparison, the

narratives around the Pelosi case, especially in its second half, appeared more official, inundated with Party speak, jargons and explicit pro-regime messages.

Apart from the synergies with popular culture, how open the discussions are and whether they challenge the existing power relations are also crucial factor on distinguishing new propaganda from the old (Edelstein 1997: 12). Judging against this benchmark, the Covid and protest case resembles more to new propaganda, as it contains more vibrant discussions and competitions between different perspectives. Noteworthily, it is the only case where popular propagandists were divided into two evenly matched camps with contrasting opinions. Popular propagandists were eager to sell their propositions, refute opposing views and engage with the audience. Critical and reflexive voices on the chaos and failure of pandemic control were not thin on the field. By contrast, neither the Pelosi nor the Balloon case triggered as heated debates among popular propagandists, as it is virtually impossible for any public figure to openly support Taiwan independence, closer Taiwan-US engagements or conceding to the US's pressure (Blanchett 2019: 130; Shirk 2023: 210). Under President Xi's "China Dream" narratives that ties individuals' fate with national rejuvenation, such actions would be considered as damaging China's "core interests" and betraying one's Chinese identity (Brown 2022). Thus, anti-foreign messages' dominance of the narratives around the two international events comes as no surprise. It is worthwhile to mention the debates in the Pelosi case centring on how such a political event of high stakes should be communicated to the public. Despite the unity in supporting the government and opposing the US and Taiwan, disagreements still exist on less central aspects of an event, a point further attesting my argument about popular propagandists' non-homogeneity. To sum up, the issue of pandemic management elicits the most

vibrant debates, followed by the Pelosi case. The dominance of "anti-US" narratives lacking diversification on the Ballon case places it at the bottom of this comparison.

Third, I argue that different forms of propaganda can coexist, compete and transform from one to the other depending on the nature of a political event and how it evolves over time. Both the Pelosi case and the Balloon case display intra-case variations along with the event's development. Overall, a shift from agitational and irrational propaganda to integrational and rational propaganda is observed in the Pelosi case. Moreover, indications of new propaganda marked by the playful languages in the initial period were replaced by the transmission of official lines and dissemination of statist messages of old propaganda in the latter period. The brief emergence of new propaganda debating the controversial assertiveness was soon taken over by the old propaganda of common hatred against outside enemies. As for the Wandering Balloon case, the shootdown of the balloon led to the hardening of rhetoric and a shift into the direction of old propaganda, epitomized in the grand narratives asserting China's superiority over the US. While the two geopolitical events demonstrate how propaganda can transform into different styles, the Covid and protest case reveals how different styles can coexist and compete within a case. Though uniformity of opinions is observed on the issue of anti-lockdown protests, pandemic control, as the protests' background, triggers intense debates among popular propagandists. Those who supported relaxing control displayed a strong indication of new propaganda by showing greater tolerance towards different views and willingness to engage with sceptics in rational language. Those who opposed lifting control appeared intolerant and irrational in their communication by denouncing their rivalling opinions, inclining towards old propaganda.

Explaining Intra-case and Inter-case Variations

Empirical analysis reveals both inter-case and intra-case variations in propaganda tactics and nationalism themes. This section focuses on the distinctive nature of each case and reviews what factors lead to such variations. To be specific, why are certain cases able to generate greater "propaganda warming" than others, and what factors contribute to a stronger inclination towards a certain type of propaganda?

"Core Interest" Matters

Judging from the level of engagement, intensity and variety of nationalism messages and diversity of propaganda tactics, the Pelosi case no doubt generates the highest level of "propaganda warming" among the three cases. Against the background of deteriorating Sino-US and cross-Strait relations (Nye 2021), the intransigence and heightened hostility from the Chinese side is anything but surprising. Reunion with Taiwan and overcoming US hegemony, two key objectives reflected from the Pelosi case's narratives, are of both geopolitical and ideological importance to China. Realization of the two goals is key to China's national interest in the Asia-Pacific region (Buszynski 2012), the legitimacy of the ruling CPC (Sandby-Thomas 2010), and the realization of the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (Brown 2022). Therefore, China interpreted Nancy Pelosi's landing in Taiwan as a blatant insult and a significant challenge to its core interests with strategic and symbolic implications. Strategically, the US's decision of sending Pelosi to Taiwan violated China's core interest of sovereignty and cross the "red line" in Sino-US relationship (Ruan et al., 2022). Symbolically, Ms. Pelosi's status as the first House majority leader to visit Taiwan was viewed as the US's "salami slicing" strategy to further drift Taiwan away

from the PRC. In this sense, popular propagandists' emotional expressions around the Pelosi case mirror the emotional diplomacy conducted by Chinese diplomats, which is also trigged by events of both symbolic and strategic importance to China (Hall 2015). Speaking exclusively to the domestic audience, such assertiveness highlighting the state's effective responses signal the state's (military) power to the public (Huang 2015) and enhances the regime's legitimacy.

Notwithstanding its crucial implications for the Sino-US relationship, the Wandering Balloon case did not involve China's "core interest" and attracted lower level of engagement from popular propagandists compared with other cases. The shootdown of the balloon constituted a symbolic insult towards China, which triggered the outpour of anti-US sentiments. However, an insult of such nature does not entail as much strategic importance as the Pelosi case does, which explains the less belligerent and provocative rhetoric style in this case. Regarding the Covid management, its critical position in China's domestic policy guarantees the high attention paid by popular propagandists. Instead of promoting nationalism, however, discussions about pandemic management aimed to psychologically preparing the public for a major policy shift. Unlike the two geopolitical events which belonged to the settled topics in China's public sphere, the change in pandemic policy was a nascent issue with confusing signals from the state, which encouraged the competition between different perspectives. Popular propagandists rarely talked about anti-lockdown protest due to its sensitive nature in China's information environment (Roberts 2018: 148; Burcu 2022). The few narratives about protest were highly unified in denouncing protestors and defending the regime. I argue that the anti-regime voices involved in the protests

hardens the popular propagandists' rhetoric, as they are under the popular pressure to overtly perform their patriotism, in this case demonstrated as pro-regime attitudes.

The Power of the Foreign "Other": Culture-politics Synergies and Reflexiveness

The two geopolitical events generate more synergies with popular cultures than the domestic Covid and protest case. One possible interpretation is that the two international cases are more about "politics" while the domestic one is mostly concerned with "policy". The discussion of "politics" tends to be more ideological, volatile and sentimental, while those on politics more level-headed and pragmatic (Zhao 2005). Moreover, the involvement of foreign countries is a key factor in stimulating the popular propagandists' discursive creativity. Ironically, the anti-foreign nationalist narratives turn out to be the main engine driving the integration of political events and popular culture. In the Pelosi case, the ridiculing and condemnations of Pelosi, the US and Taiwanese people were communicated via buzzwords carrying derogatory connotations. The Wandering Balloon case displays a different pattern of culture-politics synergies through the collective reimagination of a political event via a trending cultural product. It demonstrates a reproduction cycle of China's total propaganda: Encouraged by the surging grassroots nationalism and the nudge from the top-echelon, China's cultural industry has been producing more nationalism-infused cultural products in recent years (Zou 2019; Sullivan & Zhao 2019). These cultural products feed back into the real-world political events via popular propagandists' reproductions, a process breathing new lives and adding new

meanings into them. The whole reproduction cycle generated more "propaganda warming" and further promotes nationalism.

It turns out that popular propagandists are more critical towards domestic than international events, in line with previous literature's finding about Chinese nationalism (Min 2009). The critical views from popular propagandists are inherently limited by its unconditional loyalty towards the regime. Criticisms must not target the top leaders, must not question the CPC's leadership, must not damage the ideal image of the Chinese nation and must not hurt China's "core interests". Moreover, whether an issue belongs to the "settled" realms in China's public sphere impacts the openness of its discussions. By "settled", I am referring to hyper-sensitive issues such as 1989 pro-democracy protests and the private lives of top leaders, which is impossible to discuss (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015), as well as topics and issues which have little room for debate outside of the prescribed "political correctness". Both the Pelosi case and the Wandering Balloon case have more than one dimensions concerning the prescribed lines of China's "political correctness", such as the inevitability of "reunion with Taiwan" and overcoming the US's hegemony. Such topics not only faces both top-down and bottom-up pressures to shape the "correct" narratives around them, which severely curtails the expressions of alternative voices. In contrast, a nascent policy issue involving future uncertainties and concerns little with the settled topics, such as the reversal of "zero Covid" policies, has more room for public contemplation and debates (Speelman 2023).

To sum up, I argue the propaganda and nationalism profiles of a political event is influenced by the involvement or absence of a significant "other" and China's "core interests". "Propaganda warming" reaches its climax when both elements are present,

entailing most diversified propaganda and nationalism profiles and highest level of engagement. The "other" normally manifests as a foreign force that poses significant challenges to China. It is not necessarily limited to actual foreign actors though, as popular propagandists can either imagine a "other" or deny domestic actors as one of "us" (Wang & Burcu 2024). The presence of "other" increases the intensity of nationalist messages, mainly driven by anti-foreign sentiments, and generates greater synergies between politics and popular cultures. Whether an issue is related China's "core interest" influences the level of engagement from popular propagandists. Though China interprets its "core interests" in an intentionally ambiguous way (Zeng et al., 2015), some topics' importance is beyond doubt, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and the legitimacy of the Party. On top of these encoded topics, some issues' importance gets elevated due to the changes in current political situations, such as Sino-US rivalry and Covid-19 management. In China's information environment, high level of "propaganda warming" is a result of joint operations of old and new propaganda, as irrational, agitational and pro-regime messages coexist with the use of popular buzzwords and the references to popular cultures.

Communication Authenticity: The Performative Dimension of Popular Propagandists

The previous sections have discussed how popular propagandists' communication activities relate to China's (cyber) nationalism and theories of total propaganda. However, neither propaganda nor the nationalism literature can fully explain their modus operandi, particularly the "personalization" and self-promotion in their communications. Unlike depersonalized news outlets, popular propagandists pay

efforts to construct their persona, interact with their fans, adopt distinctive language styles and, if necessary, fight hard to keep their personal reputation, which is best optimized in the "Hu Xijin vs. Chairman Rabbit" debates documented in Chapter Six. As a propagandist, such personalization is not only unnecessary but even inconducive, since the damage of one's personal reputation will harm their message credibility (Huang et al., 2018: 2612). As will be further discussed in the following parts, the overly profit-seeking or the failure to live up to public expectations will harm propagandists' reputations. Analysis also reveals that notwithstanding their overall pro-regime stance, popular propagandists vary in their topic focuses and narrative styles, and at times can vehemently disagree with each other. Considering their minimal impact on influencing the actual policy-making process, one must wonder why they intentionally stage such debates in online public sphere. For example, what is the incentive for "anti-opening camps" as discussed in the pandemic control case to resist the official signalling of relaxing control while simultaneously highlighting their pro-regime stance? Similarly, in the Pelosi case, what motivates two prominent opinion leaders to engage in a heated debate about communication assertiveness which could trigger further public backlash against the government in the face of an external threat? To understand these questions, I argue that it is necessary to recognize the parallel between popular propagandists and wanghong, both being strategic communicators encouraged by media entrepreneurship. The performative dimension of popular propagandists deserves no less attention than their propagandistic and nationalistic aspects.

Authenticity, the notion of behaviour reflecting one's true self, provides a useful lens to understand the performativity of popular propagandists. Contrasting "whatever is

fake, unreal, or false" (Lindholm 2008: 2), authenticity of mediated communication demands trustworthiness (i.e., being accurate, correct), originality (i.e., being genuine, real), and spontaneity (i.e., being true to oneself, unscripted) from communicators (Enli 2015). The audience's expectations of authenticity from political communicators contribute to the rise of popular propagandists. On the one hand, their choice of social media rather than traditional media as the operation site can illicit greater presumed authenticity from audience as attested by previous empirical studies (Enli & Rosenberg 2018; Lee et al., 2020). On the other hand, popular propagandists are preferred over depersonalized or official news outlets due to their accessibility, personalization, and independent status, paralleling the public's preference over microcelebrity rather than traditional celebrity (Somdahl-Sands & Finn 2015).

Maintaining consistency in one's communication style as well as one's persona is crucial for political authenticity (Enli 2015; Luebke 2021: 642). Paralleling self-branding efforts of wanghong (Zhang & de Seta 2018), popular propagandists construct various personas before their audience, including the well-informed, authoritative veteran journalist, the culture-savvy, sharp-tongued scholar and straightforward, emotional veteran PLA soldier. An appealing, distinctive and consistent personal brand is important for one's success in China's competitive digital environment. Failing to meet the public's expectations or acting in line with certain norms harm political communicators' authenticity (Parry-Giles 2014). For example, Sima Nan, the self-branded "anti-US fighters", were subject to enormous public censure and saw his accounts temporarily banned after the news of his owning an apartment in the US broke out (Tang 2022). For the Chinese public, his purchase, though entirely legitimate, is anything but authentic but an act of hypocrisy, which is

typical of certain individuals "who criticize the US as if it was their job but simultaneously dream for settling in the US" (*fanmei shi gongzuo, fumei shi shenghuo*, 反美是工作，赴美是生活). Moreover, social media blunders, manifested as rude, unpolished and politically incorrect speeches, corresponding to the "immediacy" dimension of political authenticity (Luebke 2020: 645), can also elicit positive appreciation of the communicator's authenticity from audience (Lee et al., 2020). The strategy is widely observed in popular propagandists' communications, often by performing one's emotions, such as indignation or sorrow, or expressing ultra-xenophobic, racist and sexist perspectives.

Unlike ordinary microcelebrity whose profiteering activities have received public approval (Han 2021: 321), popular propagandists are more likely to subject to public criticisms for taking similar practices, especially when endorsing foreign brands. Hawk, for example, was ridiculed by netizens for his advertising for Japanese-made condoms that went against his ultra-anti-Japan stance. Moreover, popular propagandists at times have to sacrifice authenticity in order to stay within the "red lines" prescribed by the state, which means they are often barred from speaking freely on sensitive issues due to (self)censorship. When it comes to issues involving high stakes and the sudden change in official lines, popular propagandists have to adhere to the official lines, regardless of being welcomed or not, rather than keep their opinion's consistency. The pressure from the state also impacts the "immediacy" dimension of political authenticity exemplified as spontaneous and linguistic styles and staged "political incorrectness" (Shane 2018; Pillow et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the enormous clickbait potential, popular propagandists' hyper-sensational statements and radical perspectives are increasingly at odds with the state's

demands on key opinion leaders to embody "socialist core values" and disseminate "positive energies" (CAC 2020). The regulator has stepped up in cracking down the acts of "hyping up" (*chaozuo*, 炒作) in blind pursuit of online traffic (CAC 2023), an act drawing fierce public criticism.

Apart from authenticity, ordinariness and intimacy are also key concepts for the understanding of strategic communicators' practices. Popular propagandists regularly signpost their "ordinariness" to the audience and refuse to be regarded with official mouthpiece. For online influencers, ordinariness refers to their efforts to impress their followers as an ordinary person who faces real-life problems such as divorce, academic failures and health issues (Sandel & Wang 2022). Politicians, whose social identity in real world distinguishes them from ordinary people, make extra efforts to highlight their imperfection, down-to-earthiness, and amateurism to wage a charm offense on the public (Luebke 2021: 644; Enli 2015). President Xi, for example, joined the public and enjoyed steamed buns with them in a small restaurant at the beginning of his presidency. On the Chinese Internet where resentment against the rich is prevalent (Gerth 2011; Szablewicz 2014), constructing a sense of ordinariness requires one to dissuade its audience from associating them with privileged socio-economic status. Many communicators frequently posted about their frugal lifestyles and commitment to "revolutionary" ideas, following the same practices of cadres and celebrities (Sullivan & Kehoe 2019: 245-246).

For popular propagandists, "ordinariness" further requires them to demonstrate "independence" from top-down influences, as Chinese netizens tend to trust independent and non-official information sources whom they believe reflect more authentic views (Huang et al., 2018; Neagli 2021). It is therefore understandable for

Hu Xijin, the former chief editor of Global Times, went extra miles to dismiss speculation that he was enjoying better health care during Covid-19. Highlighting one's ordinariness does not contradict the practice of leveraging one's social capital as established journalists or academics to increase their messages' persuasiveness. The same practice is also taken by Chinese local officials who utilize their cadre status to endorse products while engaging live commerce (Sullivan et al., 2023).

The impression of intimacy between fans and online influencers, described as "perceived interconnectedness" (Abidin 2015), is achieved via the co-cultivation of fan-idol relationships, often through frequent online interactions including sharing personal interests and life stories, and taking advantage of one's sexuality (Yan & Yang 2021; Guan 2021). For politicians and political communicators, constructing intimacy is often achieved by presenting one's backstage persona apart from the political one (Goffman 1959). Therefore, popular propagandists also have to cultivate fandom through regular interactions with followers, though to a less extent than ordinary wanghong. Diehard supporters fands will defend their idols as if protecting their family members by engaging in a para-kin relationship (Yan & Yang 2021). One caveat is that the para-kin relationship between popular propagandists and their followers is more ambiguous than that of ordinary wanghong, as the sentiments towards individual are easily conflated with those towards the Chinese nation. This is a tentative argument because I focus predominantly on popular propagandists themselves, rather than their interactions with netizens, a topic worth exploring in future research.

To sum up, the performative dimension of popular propagandists is moderated by their political agenda, and vice versa. Following a political agenda does not mean that one

must stick to a set of strict ideological principles, nor that political discussions account for the largest share of the contents. Rather, it suggests that popular propagandists, different from most content producers on the Chinese Internet, closely follow current affairs and actively communicate them to the public. The political agenda has a complex relationship with China's digital political economy. While it is not in contradiction with pursuing a monetizing agenda, excessive profiteering damages the authenticity of political communication (Hofstetter & Gollnhofer 2024). The government's vital decision-making, policy programmes and involvement in high-stake political events provides both opportunities and risks for popular propagandists, depending on their capability to navigate through the ambiguous official "red lines" and volatile online public opinions. Though emphasizing their personalized feature and their status as active content producers, I do not equal them to either public intellectuals or wanghong, whose narratives and communications have received extensive attention elsewhere (Fogel, et al. 2019; Abidin 2018). Popular propagandists are not interested in conducting academic inquiries. Also, they are less independent than intellectuals in the sense that they are more likely to repost the official lines.

Conclusion

The thesis conceptualizes the role played by nationalistic online key opinion leaders as popular propagandists in the propagation of cyber nationalism. The communication activities of popular propagandists demonstrate the complexity in the formation and expression of Chinese (cyber) nationalism. As many scholars have noted elsewhere, cyber nationalism is more than assuming a new medium for the expression of nationalism (Schneider 2018; Jiang 2012; Ma 2015). Rejecting technological determinism, I argue that research on cyber nationalism should emphasize the interaction between the Internet and its users, and how the latter's practices are influenced and mediated, but by no means determined, by the digital context. Following such premise, I focus on popular propagandists, a group of actors whose activities bear crucial implication in the co/re-production and dissemination of cyber nationalism. This thesis also bridges two crucial concepts, propaganda and nationalism, both of which hold significant weight in studying China's politics and international relations. Examining key opinion leaders' nationalist narratives as propaganda, I am not passing a normative judgement on them, but aim to highlight the nationalistic core of their messages and demonstrate the versatility of propaganda theories in both political sciences and communication studies. The empirical study not only illustrates the communication habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles of different actors across different cases, but also reveals the difference in the everydayness and eventfulness of their propaganda activities. Each of the three political events examined is an important case in its timeliness and the crucial implications to China's domestic or foreign policies. In this chapter, I will first summarize the substantive and theoretical contributions of this thesis, then discuss

how my findings relate to broader issues and topics in Chinese studies and conclude with its limitations and suggestions for future research.

Substantial Contributions

The co/reproduction, dissemination and consumption of cyber nationalism on the Chinese Internet is a complex process involving various stakeholders. Popular propagandists are encouraged by the state's promotion of "positive energy" and "main melody" in online content production and pursue nationalist media entrepreneurship (Yang & Tang 2018). I conceptualize nationalist media entrepreneurship as self-made media practitioners' productions of nationalistic contents in pursuit for online popularity. It has also driven many popular propagandists to become a guest writer for "we media" (*zimeiti*, 自媒体), the individually operated or studio run outlets, constituting part of the online media ecosystem which focuses on the production and dissemination of cyber nationalism. The composition of active popular propagandists on Sina Weibo, as I have demonstrated in Chapter Four, suggests that most communicators are of grassroots background who have achieved their online fame via nationalist media entrepreneurship. Being an influential journalist or intellectual in the physical world does not guarantee one's success as a nationalistic online key opinion leader. Moreover, male users' disproportionate presence in popular propagandists reaffirms the gendered nature of Chinese nationalism (Wu 2014: 240), notwithstanding female netizens' active presence in recently emerged fandom nationalism (Wang 2022; Liu 2018). These findings answer the first sub-question regarding the "who" issue: Popular propagandists are predominantly composed of male netizens with thousands and even millions of followers. Most of them are not

well-known in the physical world but achieve online fame via nationalist media entrepreneurship, a mechanism that generates online popularity by commentating on sociopolitical issues both home and abroad.

Cyber nationalism incorporates a wide range of appeals, demands and propositions with varying emphasis on different nationalism themes, which are expressed in different ways depending on the event and the communicator. Chapter Five illustrates the communication habits, propaganda and nationalism profiles of popular propagandists by highlighting relevant indicators such as posting frequency, discussed topics, propaganda tactics and nationalism themes. On the collective level, "informing" and "expressing opinion" are the two most frequently adopted propaganda tactics, suggesting high levels of information richness and originality in their produced contents. "Anti-foreign sentiments", manifested as mocking, ridiculing and criticizing foreign countries, actors, ideologies and cultures in general, is the most salient nationalism messages from popular propagandists. Popular propagandists do not necessarily prioritize producing a large quantity of nationalist messages, as the sample contains more non-nationalistic posts than nationalistic ones.

In terms of topics engaged, roughly the same emphasis is given to domestic politics and foreign affairs, with China's foreign policies and its role in the world receiving slightly more attention. Compared with communicating official lines to the public or interacting with their fellow commentators, popular propagandists are more likely to reflect public opinions, address public sentiments and interact with ordinary netizens. When it comes to the individual level, however, substantial variations exist in terms of what and how each actor communicates. This finding suggests that popular propagandists are not a homogenous group but stand-alone actors who follow different

discussion agendas and communication strategies. Moreover, it turns out that the level of sophistication in one's communication profiles, judging from the diversity in propaganda tactics and nationalism themes, influences the popularity of a communicator in terms of the number of followers and the "likes" one receives. These findings address the second sub-question: Individual popular propagandists vary substantially in what and how they communicate. On the collective level, however, they emphasize information richness and originality, prioritize "anti-foreign" nationalism and actively interact with the grassroots.

The breakout of political events of high stakes presents both opportunity and challenge for popular propagandists. On the one hand, they can attract greater online traffic by taking advantage of the "propaganda warming" generated by these events. On the other hand, political events of high stakes tend to involve great sensitivities, the engagement of which is risky for public figures who have to be careful not to cross the numerous "red lines" (Sullivan & Kehoe 2019). For popular propagandists, commenting on political events is all about balancing "political correctness", understood in the Chinese context as allegiance with the official line, against the sensational media effects. Investigating the case-specific posts reveal both inter-case and intra-case differences as demonstrated in Chapter Five, premised on the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of propaganda. Pelosi's Taiwan visit and Covid-19 management dominated most communicators' discussion agenda, while the Wandering Balloon case and, in particular, anti-lockdown protests, drew far less attention. The difference in attention is explained by the sensitivities and discussion agenda carried by different "meta-themes" in China's information environment. Sovereignty issues, especially Taiwan, are likely to meet with most fierce responses

from China, while anti-regime protests are subject to heavy censorship. The Pelosi and the Balloon case, both involving foreign actors, elicited more nationalist expressions, driven by a surge in the "anti-foreign" sentiments. In contrast, popular propagandists became less nationalistic when discussing Covid management. Different political events bring forth various propaganda and nationalism profiles. The Pelosi case prompted the most diversified communication profile of all three cases. Overall, "informing" and "expressing opinion" remain the most salient propaganda tactics of all cases. "Neologism", understood as the use/creation of buzzwords or the references to popular cultures, is a prominent feature of the two geopolitical cases. Except for the Covid and protest case, "anti-foreign sentiments" is the most salient nationalism theme.

Interpreting how popular propagandists communicate their messages on different political events calls for attention to the textual level, the results of which are presented from Chapter Six to Eight. From China's perspective, Pelosi's Taiwan visit was a provocation towards its sovereignty and challenged its "core interest". The Taiwan issue has long been a focal point in China's propaganda work and nationalist expressions (Shirk 2007: 181; Hughes 2013), which makes the assertive propaganda rhetoric anything but a surprise. However, the undisciplined assertiveness from certain actors calling for military actions mispresented the official position and led to the backlash in public opinions. It further triggered debates among popular propagandists about how to communicate with the public responsibly and effectively, epitomized in the debate between Hu Xijin and Chairman Rabbit. The deviation from the main discussion agenda was brief and they were quickly united in airing pro-regime

messages and hailing the changing power dynamic in favour of the PRC in the Taiwan strait but also on the global stage.

Regarding the Covid and protest case, it is important to take note of not only what was discussed but also what was not. Without evidence of censorship, most communicators chose to self-censor and avoided talking about anti-lockdown protests. The few protest-related messages were consistent in their harsh denouncement of protestors and wholehearted embrace of the government. In contrast, lively debates between two evenly matched camps were observed on pandemic control. Those who supported relaxing control highlighted poor policy implementations and downsides of draconian policies such as prolonged lockdowns and mass testing. Their opponents defended the effectiveness of "zero Covid" approach and resisted lifting controls, a position going against the latest official signalling of relaxing control. Despite their criticisms on pandemic control or resistance to the policy shift, neither camp directly challenged the central government's grand strategy of combating Covid-19. The "pro-opening" camp was keen to stress the responsiveness of top leadership in adjusting policies and carefully limited their criticisms to the local governments and policy implementation, rather than the central government's decision-making. The "anti-opening camp", for their part, emphasized their intention to protect the legacy of "zero Covid" as a pandemic control path with Chinese characteristics, and expressed their concerns of the reopening's destabilizing effects on regime legitimacy.

Though receiving less attention, the Wandering Balloon case is no less important than the rest two cases. Unlike the Pelosi case where China was in a "defensive" posture against a perceived foreign threat, the balloon controversy was a diplomatic crisis initiated by China that undermined its image as a responsible stakeholder and its

promise of respecting each country's sovereignty (Zheng 2016). Intruding on its major rival, the US, further added to the case's complexity, as being excessively apologetic risked being interpreted as a sign of weakness by the domestic public (Weiss 2014). As shown in Chapter Eight, the messages communicated by popular propagandists expressed no remorse, denied China's responsibility and instead blamed the US's overreaction for increasing the tension. They also went beyond the defensive position in turning this diplomatic embarrassment into a celebration of China's strength and the US's decline via a "reimagination" of this incident by virtue of a popular nationalistic blockbuster.

To sum up, the coding results plus the textual analysis jointly answer the third sub-question: Popular propagandists demonstrate varying levels of communication activeness, distinctive propaganda and nationalism profiles, and narrative patterns in the face of socio-political events of different natures. A number of factors of a political event influence their communication activities, including the involvement/absence of foreign actors and China's "core interests", and the sensitivities carried by it in China's information environment. Despite their overall pro-regime stances, popular propagandists diverge in their propaganda styles, nationalist ideas, perspectives and interpretations of specific policy issues.

Theoretical Contribution

I consider the theoretical contributions of this thesis lie in the following aspects. In terms of propaganda studies, I have further developed the critical approach informed by poststructuralism and critical theories (Wimberly 2019; L'Etang & Pieczka 2006) and illustrated how online key opinion leaders can operate as popular propagandists.

Moreover, I have demonstrated the flexibility of Jacques Ellul and Alexander Edelstein's theories by applying them to the case of China, which provides important empirical evidence. Regarding nationalism, I critically engage with the "official vs. popular" paradigm in studying Chinese nationalism and conceptualize popular propagandists as the "intermediary" level of nationalist expressions. The empirical research further illustrates the key components of China's cyber nationalism and how its expression is conditioned by digital (sub)cultures and political events of different natures.

Propaganda

As I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, propaganda studies have experienced a critical turn from the preoccupation of distinguishing propaganda from "ethical communication" towards recognizing the propagandistic dimension of more forms of communications. The critical perspective does not equal to cynicism that reduces everything to propaganda. Instead, it reminds researchers not to limit our attention to the conventional forms of political communications. The ever-changing media and cultural landscape owing to the rapid development of ICTs have crucial implications for propaganda studies. Propaganda has not only seen a surge in its information volume and reach, but also taken on novel forms. Researchers need to stay abreast of these changes and keep asking themselves: Does this form of communication have a propagandistic dimension to it? The case of China, where ICTs and popular cultures thrive under the resilient authoritarian regime, offers us a good opportunity to examine the new forms of propaganda. Though "hard" propaganda that intentionally presents "dull" contents still exist in China for the aim of signalling power and eliciting obedience (Huang 2015, 2018), "soft" propaganda that is user-friendly, persuasive,

and often creatively incorporates high techs and popular cultures is on the rise (Zou 2023; Mattingly & Yao 2022). Particularly, the increasingly participatory nature of digital propaganda calls for greater attention to the role played by non-state actors in propaganda (Zhang 2021; Repnikova & Fang 2018).

My theoretical framework has demonstrated the compatibility and complementariness of Jacques Ellul and Alexander Edelstein's propaganda theories. To begin with, both thinkers are not preoccupied with a normative concern and reckon propaganda as a sociological phenomenon existing in both authoritarian and democratic countries. The sociological perspective enables propaganda enquiry to go beyond the formal political actors and acknowledges the role played by non-state actors. The ubiquity of propaganda in our everyday life is captured by the concept of "total propaganda", which further unites the two thinkers' theoretical position. If Ellul's work ultimately comes down to pessimism and denial of individual agency in face of propaganda, then Edelstein's work features in optimism originating from his confidence in "new propaganda" as a liberating force against "old propaganda". Therefore, Ellul's theory captures the communication activities of popular propagandists, and Edelstein' theory acknowledges their self-initiatives as independent actors. Foregrounding the sociological view of propaganda, I treat propaganda as a communication process, which reveals complexity of actors involved who carry different perspectives.

The case of the Chinese Internet develops the two thinkers' original theoretical positions. Regarding Ellul's theory, I argue that the increasingly decentred nature of digital propaganda problematizes his claim that propaganda, as a form of technique, is operated by "organized groups" (Ellul 1965: 61). Popular propagandists are self-made media entrepreneurs, most of whom are without strict institutional affiliation.

Moreover, when propaganda is examined through the perspective of power, popular propagandists not only derive their power from the mass's support but also, to a greater extent, from the approval from the state. In other words, in the authoritarian context as China, propaganda, when carried out by non-state actors, is not so much a means for gaining power but a process of complex power negotiations between the grassroots and the state. Furthermore, the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" dimensions of propaganda reveals to what extent popular propagandists' discussion agenda are centred around a particular political event. Last but not least, I have further developed the Ellulian typology of propaganda by demonstrating the flexibility and potential for different forms of propaganda to coexist, compete or transform under different contexts. In a relatively stable society, pro-regime actors can reinvent "agitation propaganda" by going beyond the domestic realm and transfusing the anger into the "unjust" status quo of international order. Similarly, emotional expressions can be strategically used for integration function by containing public dissents within an emotional sanctuary. The transmission of official lines is becoming more subtle and less discernible, without overt praise singing or "personality cult".

The case of digital China where popular cultures coevolve with rather than resist authoritarianism brings new theoretical implications to Edelstein's differentiation between "new" and "old" propaganda. The bottom-up propaganda messages and the synergies generated between politics and cultures do not necessarily reflect liberal values. From the actor's perspective, popular propagandists are self-made media practitioners, who have broken the mass media's monopoly of covering political news via nationalist media entrepreneurship. However, several actors hold enduring influence and dominate the online discursive field, making it difficult for less

influential communicators to make their voices heard. Moreover, the "professionalization" of popular propagandists by partnering with think tanks and media organizations renders this undertaking increasingly unfriendly to newcomers. Judging from the contents they produce, certain perspectives are pre-excluded from their narratives, such as liberal, feminist perspectives or critical opinions towards the regime. This practice goes against Edelstein's argument that new propaganda should encourage the expression and competition between a plurality of political ideas. The differentiation between "old" and "new" propaganda, thus, needs to go beyond the context of liberal democracy and account for the differences in authoritarian regime. Instead, I argue that the level of synergies generated between politics and popular culture and the openness of debates are two crucial indicators for making such differentiations. Last but not least, I have illustrated the empirical indicators for measuring the concept of "propaganda warming", including the attention received by a political event as well as the diversification of the propaganda and nationalism profiles it elicits.

Nationalism

This thesis's investigation starts with the assumption that cyber nationalism does not equal to either popular nationalism or official nationalism, notwithstanding its empowerment of ordinary citizens' political participation (Yang 2009; Wu & Fitzgerald 2023) or its facilitation of digital authoritarianism and cyber governance (Creemers 2017; Chew & Wang 2021). I argue that on top of official actors and the general public, the study of China's cyber nationalism should pay more attention to the "intermediary" level, represented by those actors situating between the official and grassroots who have more resources and influence than ordinary netizens but less so

than official actors. Similar examples include tech companies, social media platforms, online community regulators and news aggregators, the discussions of which have been made elsewhere (Han 2018; Neagli 2021; Wang & Li 2023). By highlighting the intermediary level, I am not arguing for a new type of nationalist expressions that is distinct from either that of official or popular nationalism. Nor do I consider the digital environment fundamentally changes the formation and expression of Chinese nationalism. For one thing, the intermediary level is not a stand-alone construct but in close relation to both official and popular nationalism. Moreover, acknowledging its existence complicates, rather than homogenizes popular nationalism by revealing the complex power dynamics between different stakeholders. My theoretical position is supported by previous literatures on the diversified and competing thoughts of Chinese intellectuals (Fogel et al., 2019), and in particular the rise of intellectual nationalism which contains both academic and vulgar narratives (as discussed in Chapter Two). Even China's official nationalism, which functions as a binding ideology on the political elites (Brown 2012), is far from iron-clad but consists of numerous occasions of power struggles and purges in the top echelon of the Party (See for example, Zhao Ziyang (2012)'s biography). Therefore, I consider my conceptualization of the intermediary level as an "anatomy" of China's popular nationalism which used to be treated as an intact whole, in order to uncover the similarities, differences and conflicts in the narratives lying underneath.

The main differences between popular propagandists and other "intermediary" actors lie in their productivity and personalization, which enable them to communicate with their audience in "my voice". Empirical analysis has revealed that their propagated messages are a result of negotiation between the "political correctness" required by

the official line and the public expectations to be authentic and independent. Institutionally, most popular propagandists have virtually no connection to government agencies or media organizations that are conventionally considered as the government's propaganda apparatus (*xuanchu kou*, 宣传口). However, their pursuit for nationalist media entrepreneurship differs them from ordinary netizens, who, though being capable of expressing nationalism, lack the same level of consistency and productivity. As far as their produced contents are concerned, it is rather difficult to judge whether popular propagandists align more closely with either official or popular nationalism. Overall speaking, though most popular propagandists prioritize the "bottom-up" rather than the "top-down" transmission of nationalist messages, they have demonstrated firm allegiance to the official line when it comes to critical political events. Notwithstanding their pro-regime stance, popular propagandists do not share the disciplines and ideological commitments of official propagandists, such as professional media practitioners working for state media (Zou 2023). Vulgarity, exaggeration, fake news, conspiracy theories are common in popular propagandists' communications, such as Hu Xijin's sensational call of "shooting her down" in the Pelosi case as shown in Chapter Six. Therefore, I argue that there exists a performative dimension in popular propagandists' communication activities, and it is necessary to treat them as strategic communicators on top of propagandist. In a sense, China's burgeoning wanghong culture inspires popular propagandists in how to appeal to the audience and construct their distinctive persona (Wang & Feng 2022). Popular propagandists' engagement with sociopolitical issues, which ordinary wanghong tend to steer clear of, has made them a distinctive group of media entrepreneurs on the Chinese Internet.

Previous research on China's cyber nationalism has reached different and sometimes contradictory findings regarding its proposition and orientation, such as whether being xenophobic or cosmopolitan (Zhang et al., 2018), critical or pro-regime (Han 2021), rational or irrational (Wang 2018). I argue that the choice of case and sampling method may affect the results. Moreover, as the production, dissemination and consumption of cyber nationalism is a complicated process involving different stakeholders, it is difficult to pass a definitive judgement on the exact nature of the totality of cyber nationalism. Instead, I limit my ambition to present a specific part of cyber nationalism represented by the narratives of popular propagandists, who occupy a peculiar "intermediary" position between the official and grassroots. Unpacking the narrative patterns of several prominent nationalism themes reveals several insights presented as follows.

Firstly, propaganda messages featuring "anti-foreign" messages dominate both the "everydayness" and "eventfulness" of popular propagandists' communications. The targets include both abstract constructs, such as "system", "liberty", "freedom", "hegemony" as well as concrete nations and individuals, whose expression ranges from sophisticated arguments to playful sarcasms. I argue that popular propagandists' anti-foreign propaganda is "total" in the sense that it covers across the "political", "sociological" and "apolitical" aspects (Ellul 1965: 9; Edelstein 1997: 9). The dissemination of anti-foreign sentiments has gone beyond specific political events or conventional political fields and targeted the "totality" of foreignness, including its lifestyles and ideology. Moreover, as both Chapter Six and Chapter Eight have illustrated, anti-foreign propaganda encourages rather than stems the synergies between popular cultures and politics. The supposedly "old", hatred-infused anti-

foreign messages are often conflated with playful languages in popular propagandists' communication.

Secondly, propaganda messages featuring "national pride" messages is a thread running through both the Pelosi and the Balloon case. Popular propagandists' expression of national pride over occasions of China's diplomatic crisis and public opinion backlash seems counterintuitive. Granted, neither Pelosi's groundbreaking visit to Taiwan as the (former) leader of US Congress, or China's infringement upon the US's airspace is something to be celebrated in the first place. However, popular propagandists manage to turn the narratives in favour of China. Such narratives reflect the domestic side of China's "confident rise" required by President Xi, matching its increasingly assertive diplomacy (Friedberg 2014). Nevertheless, I consider such expression of national pride has brought more harm than good to China's online public sphere, as its blindness and narrow-mindedness stifles the critical and reflexive views and discourages vibrant public debates.

Thirdly, critical nationalism expressed by popular propagandists' is constrained by various factors. Of all the three cases, critical nationalism only achieved salience in the predominantly domestic-focused Covid and protest case, a finding largely in line with previous literatures regarding the conditioned criticality of Chinese nationalism (Min 2009; Li 2003). However, their refusal to acknowledge China's apparent domestic policy mistakes or irresponsible international behaviour, and more importantly, their dismissal of genuine public grievance as unpatriotic behaviours is contradictory to their promise to represent to grassroots. This finding suggests that, on the one hand, popular propagandists have little interest in speaking truth to power but are content to act as pro-regime figure. On the other hand, it indicates that topics and

issues which are beyond critic or reflection in China's public sphere, on top of well-known examples such as 1989 pro-democracy movements, are now increasingly in tandem with the volatile domestic and geopolitical situation, in particular China's slowing-down economy and the deteriorating Sino-US relationship.

Last but not least, propaganda messages of "denouncing traitor" appear in all three cases, whose criterion are different depending on circumstances. In the Pelosi case, those who cast doubt upon the effectiveness of military drill or display excessive disappointment were criticized for disregarding the "big picture". Anti-lockdown protestors were subject to the harshest condemnations as saboteurs and collaborators with the imaginary "foreign forces". Regarding the matter of pandemic control, those who opposed relaxing control also indicated that their opponents were harbouring "interior motives" in anticipation for the chaos brought by lifting control measures. When it comes to the Balloon case, popular propagandists labelled those who considered China's transgression as a mistake as "unpatriotic". These findings suggest that, on the one hand, cyber nationalism as represented by popular propagandists' narratives is becoming increasingly intolerant by connecting one's loyalty to official lines as a matter of patriotic duty. On the other hand, the very label of "unpatriotic" has been taken lightly as a discursive weapon to attack one's rivalling opinions, a concerning trend which suppresses the expression of reflexive and critical views in nationalist narratives.

The Way Forward

I would like to finish the thesis with some up-to-date developments in the related fields, from which I shall discuss how the research on popular propagandists'

propagation of cyber nationalism relates to broader topics of Chinese politics, culture, and society. Much of this thesis is devoted to discussing how popular propagandists play an active role in the co/reproduction and dissemination of cyber nationalism. Some readers might be impressed by my comment denoting them as "pro-regime" communicators and equate them as chess piece of official propagandists. Perhaps the best way for me to dissuade my readers from assuming so is to share the following stories demonstrating popular propagandists' precarious positions in China's information environment.

In January 2024, Weibo Video Blogger "War Horse Movement" shared his experience of reporting a business venue in Nanjing to the police because he alleged that the shop had a decoration resembling Japanese Navy Rising Sun flag. The flag is widely considered as a symbol for Imperial Japan's militarism and its war crimes in the PRC, Taiwan and South Korea. The business owner was forced to take down the decoration, but the incident continued to receive heated online discussions and led to the outpouring of radical nationalist narratives and threats to the shop owner. The whole event only took a sharp turn when state actors weighed in and harshly denounced the War Horse's actions[15]. Official actors dismissed his actions as "high-level black" (*gaojihei*, 高级黑), a coined phrase often deployed together with "low-level red" in condemnation of nationalist discourses and actions not in line with the official nationalism (Zhang & Ma 2023). The blogger had unduly taken advantage of patriotism as "code for online traffic" (*liuliang mima*, 流量密码) for profit-seeking.

[15] The most prominent official denouncements came from Central Television Network (*yangshiwang*, 央视网) and Jun Zheng Ping (*junzhengping*, 钧正平), representing official media and military's perspectives respectively, an indication of the issue's seriousness.

Criticisms also went beyond this case and targeted the "deformed online culture" where people tried to become a "Big V" by "picking up troubles and defaming others under the banner of patriotism" (Tencent News 2024). Mainstream media including Caixin and China Business Network quickly followed up and revealed his problematic record of reporting numerous "unpatriotic" businesses (Caixin 2024; Li 2024). From official media to we media, the call for "reflections" were prevailing on the ground, and it seemed that Chinese nationalists were ready to take a deep reflection upon themselves and the online information environment.

In less than a month's time, however, the "prosecuting Mo Yan" drama broke out. The only lesson Mao Xinghuo learned from War Horse might be to portray himself not only as patriotic but also following the "rule of law". Notwithstanding its censure of "high-level black" and the "deformed online culture", the state turned out far less resolute in suppressing such trends as it did with liberal-minded online opinion leaders (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer 2015). On top of the two cases, there have been numerous incidents of such "distorted patriotism" initiated or fuelled by popular propagandists which were not criticized or even tacitly approved by the state. In August 2022, a female cosplayer who wore Japanese Yutaka were detained by the police in Suzhou on the ground of "provocations and picking up troubles", a typical pocket crime in China. Hawk, Shen Yi and Sifen were among those supporting the police's actions and condemning the girl as "lacking patriotic consciousness" and "hyping up" by revealing her experience at a sensitive time point, as August 15th coincided the commemoration of China's victory over Japan in World War II. Several news outlets' attempt to trace this incident was censored and the victim herself even apologized on Weibo and later deleted her account (CDT 2022).

These nationalistic episodes and my thesis suggest three possible directions for future research. First, future research on China's (cyber) nationalism should investigate how it is increasingly turning "inward". Granted, the importance of China's growing assertiveness on the global stage is beyond doubt, a topic generating an enormous literature on current Chinese nationalism (Spiegeleire et al., 2014; Turcsányi 2018). However, nationalism always has two sides. Much as it can be either democratic or authoritarian in nature, it can also target the outside enemies and domestic "traitors". Though "denouncing traitor" is not the most salient nationalism theme from this thesis's empirical analysis, I consider this is more of an issue of the case selection rather than the inherent nature of cyber nationalism. Even in political events mostly concerned with threats from the foreign "Other", "denouncing traitor" remained a discernible and enduring theme, a finding that attests to its significance. The investigation of the domestic side of nationalism is not detached from the foreign dimension though, as such inquiry can explain the sources of foreign assertiveness (Friedberg 2014) and how they interact with and influence upon each other (Zhao 2021). I further argue that such investigations should take notice of the claims and narratives from both state and non-state actors and see whether they converge with or diverge from each other.

Second, I suggest that future research on China's cyber governance should investigate how the regulator treats different nationalist episodes differently. Various non-state actors' participation in the co/reproduction and dissemination of cyber nationalism represent both opportunities and challenges for the state. I have shown, from my case study, that even the most authoritative pro-regime actor can cause unexpected backlash in public opinions in a case like the Pelosi visit with little room for debates,

not to mention the numerous bottom-up occasions whose narratives are far more unpredictable than the Pelosi case. The logic of cyber governance informs the state's co-optation of cyber nationalism, as it also contains a "controlling" as well as a "harnessing" dimension. In the case of popular propagandists, the state can either recognize their positive functions in "guiding public opinions" or denounce them as "distorted patriotism". Moreover, it is necessary to take different actors' reactions into considerations, including but not restricted to, for example, official media, commercial media, key opinion leaders and ordinary netizens. A comparative research design examining different cases or a process-tracing research design focusing on one case's evolvement can both shed light upon the key factors influencing the regulators' approach to cyber nationalism and the interactions between different actors.

Last but not least, I call for further endeavours in researching China's Internet culture by jointly considering its political and apolitical dimensions. Existing research on China's political culture has not fully considered the changes brought by the new information environment (Wasserstrom 2018). As the thesis argues, popular propagandists' propagation of cyber nationalism is mediated by the digital infrastructure and digital (sub)cultures. For example, wanghong economy and media entrepreneurship inspire their operations, and various online catchphrases enrich their expressions. More importantly, their potential in constructing an online persona and building quasi-fandoms have brought drastic changes to cyber nationalism. On the one hand, they have the charisma to mobilize their followers to attack whatever, or whoever they label as "unpatriotic". No wonder why a netizen sarcastically commented that War Horse Movement is a "much nobler person than most patriotic Big Vs", as he did not resort to 'lynching' but reported to the police in attacking his

opponents". On the other hand, the associations of their own persona to the nationalism allows dissidents to attack on the dominant ideology. The failure for popular propagandists to live up to the public expectation of ideal patriots is seized by their critics as an insinuating attack on patriotism. In short, cyber nationalism has brought substantial changes to Chinese people's online political participation and integrates with various forms of digital (sub)cultures. It no doubt forms a crucial and indispensable part of China's Internet (political) culture.

To sum up, this thesis conceptualizes China's nationalistic online key opinion leaders as popular propagandists, who play a key role in the co/reproduction and dissemination of China's cyber nationalism as the intermediary level between official and popular nationalism. Examining their communication activities through the lens of propaganda theories, I have demonstrated the salient propaganda tactics and nationalism themes in their messages and how they communicate political events of different natures to the audience. Critically engaging with the "official vs. popular" paradigm in conceptualizing Chinese nationalism, I have shown the complexity within the popular nationalism and how popular propagandists function as an "intermediary" level between the state and the grassroots. Popular propagandists' communication activities involve complex negotiations between official line, popular demands and peer competition. Their operations link to the broader picture of China's evolving digital propaganda and the complex relationships between different stakeholders in the formation and expression of nationalism.

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